

# **The Cultural Revolution, Fanaticism and Rationality in Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body* *Problem***

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan Kiinan kulttuurivallankumouksen, fanatistien ja rationaalisuuden roolia Liu Cixinin tieteisromaanissa <i>Santi</i> (englanniksi <i>The Three-Body Problem</i>). Sen tavoitteena on selvittää, miten romaani kuvaa kulttuurivallankumousta ja sen suhdetta Mao Zedongin jälkeiseen aikakauteen Kiinan historiassa, miten se käsittelee fanatistien ja rationaalisuuden välistä suhdetta sekä millaisina se esittää ihmiskunnan mahdollisuudet välttää tulevaisuudessa kulttuurivallankumoukseen verrattavissa olevalta väkivallalta ja siitä mahdollisesti seuraavalta ihmislajin tuhoutumiselta. Tutkielmassa hyödynnetään Max Horkheimerin ja Theodor Adornon valistuskriittistä ajattelua sekä pyritään sijoittamaan romaani kiinalaisen modernin ja kulttuurivallankumouksen jälkeisen kirjallisuuden kontekstiin. Tutkielman kannalta oleellisia kirjallisuushistoriallisia käsitteitä ovat ”arpikirjallisuus” (<i>shanghen wenxue</i>), ”juuria etsivä kirjallisuus” (<i>xungen wenxue</i>) sekä Yibing Huangin teoria ”kulttuurillisesta äpäryydestä” (<i>cultural bastardy</i>). Tutkielman teoriaosuudessa käydään myös läpi vuoden 1989 jälkeisen kiinalaisen tieteiskirjallisuuden suhdetta valistusajatteluun sekä kulttuurivallankumouksen perintöön.</p> <p>Tutkielmassa osoitetaan, että vaikka <i>Santi</i> arpikirjallisuuden tavoin tuomitsee kulttuurivallankumouksen aikaisen fanatistien sekä asettaa sen aluksi vastakkain tieteellisen ajattelun ja rationaalisuuden kanssa, romaani myös kyseenalaistaa useilla tavoilla sekä tämän vastakkainasettelun että ajatuksen kulttuurivallankumouksen loppumisesta mahdollisuutena käynnistää uudelleen valistusajatteluun perustava kiinalainen modernisaatioprojekti. Selvin esimerkki rationaalisuuden ja fanatistien yhteensovittamisesta romaanissa on sen toinen päähenkilö Ye Wenjie, joka haluaa estää väkivallan ja tuhon kierteen jatkumisen mutta ilmentää samalla kulttuurivallankumouksen perintöä pyrkimyksellään luoda ihmiskunnan uudelleen, mikä myös tekee hänestä esimerkin Yibing Huangin tarkoittamasta ”kulttuurillisesta äpäryydestä”.</p> <p>Kuvaamalla ympäristön tuhoamista ja ihmisiin kohdistuvaa väkivaltaa romaani myös havainnollistaa, kuinka rationaalisuus alentaa sekä luonnon että ihmiset tiedon kohteiksi ja luo näin perustan ympäristöä tuhoaville, epäinhimillisille ja alistaville toimintatavoille. Vaikka romaani hyväksyy valistusajatteluun kuuluvan oletuksen siitä, että maailmankaikkeus on teoriassa täysin ihmismielen ymmärrettävissä, se suhtautuu epäilevästi ihmiskunnan mahdollisuuksiin käyttää tieteellistä tietoa hallitakseen omaa kohtaloaan. Romanin kaksi viimeistä lukua jättävät kuitenkin avoimeksi, pystyykö ihmiskunta lopulta luomaan uuden vaihtoehdon valistusajattelun sisältämälle instrumentaaliselle rationaalisuudelle, mikä puolestaan mahdollistaisi väkivaltaan ja ihmiskunnan tuhoon johtavan kehityskulun pysäyttämisen. Tutkielman johtopäätös on, että pohjimmiltaan <i>Santi</i> on varoittava kertomus, joka nostaa esiin sekä fanatistien että rationaalisuuden sisältämän vaaran ihmislajin selviytymiselle mutta samalla kannustaa olemaan menettämättä toivoa ihmiskunnan tulevaisuuden ja inhimillisen kehityksen suhteen.</p>			
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Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited Keskustakampuksen kirjasto			
Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information			

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## Preface

I first became aware of a science fiction novel called *The Three-Body Problem* in late 2014, mainly through seeing its English translation referenced by authors and fans of the genre whom I followed on the Internet. As I read the novel in the spring of the following year, I encountered an intriguing and imaginative science fiction tale intertwined with a story about the lingering effects of China's Cultural Revolution, as well as what appeared to be an ambivalent portrayal of scientific advancement and the possibility of human progress. It was this intriguing ambiguity in the text that convinced me to choose Liu Cixin's novel as the topic of my master's thesis.

In several ways, choosing to study *The Three-Body Problem* meant entering territory that has been relatively unexplored in Finland, as post-Cultural Revolution Chinese literature has not been widely researched (or translated) here. Two noteworthy exceptions are Qingbo Xu's doctoral dissertation *The Evolutionary Feminism of Zhang Kangkang and the Developing Dialogue between Darwinism and Gender Studies*, which among other things examines the theme of violence during the Cultural Revolution in Zhang's works, and Annikki Arponen's MA thesis

*Kiinan ”menetetty sukupolvi” – maalle lähetetyt nuoret* (“China’s ‘lost generation’ — the sent-down youth”), which contains an overview of so-called “educated youth literature” (知青文学 *zhiqing wenxue*). In the English-speaking world, however, not only has there been a considerable number of works examining contemporary Chinese literature against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, but they have also been joined by a growing amount of research focusing on contemporary Chinese science fiction. I have greatly benefited from being able to draw upon both of these perspectives in my own analysis.

During my work on this thesis, I have been fortunate to receive support and inspiration not only from my supervisors and fellow students at the University of Helsinki, but also from a global community of science fiction fans. This community both led me to *The Three-Body Problem* in the first place and, by holding the 75th World Science Fiction Convention in Helsinki in August 2017, gave me the opportunity to meet both the novel’s author and many other Chinese people involved in the field of science fiction literature, for which I am extremely grateful. Hopefully, such encounters will become more frequent as interest towards China grows in Finland, and Finnish audiences will become better acquainted with the wide variety of stories told by Chinese writers about China and the world. It would be an honor and a privilege if my own work could play even a small part in this process.

# 1. Introduction

*The Three-Body Problem* (三体 *Santi*) can truly be described as a landmark work of Chinese science fiction. The first part of the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (地球往事 *Diqiu wangshi*) series, popularly known as the *Three-Body Trilogy* (三体三部曲 *Santi sanbuqu*), it was first serialized in the magazine *Science Fiction World* (科幻世界 *Kehuan shijie*) in 2006 and published as a book two years later. Since then, the novel has become an international critical and commercial success, winning both China's Galaxy (银河 *Yinhe*) Award and the Hugo Award for Best Novel (becoming the first translated work and the first work by an Asian author to win the latter) and selling over 110,000 copies in English translation alone,<sup>1</sup> with the whole trilogy selling over two million copies in China.<sup>2</sup> The importance of *The Three-Body*

- 1 Song Miou, "Chinese sci-fi novel international bestseller," *Xinhua*, February 3, 2016, accessed October 8, 2017, [news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/03/c\\_135071665.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/03/c_135071665.htm). As of October 2017, *The Three-Body Problem* has also been translated into Czech, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Korean, Spanish, Thai, Turkish, and Vietnamese (Wikipedia contributors, "The Three-Body Problem (novel)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed October 21, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Three-Body\\_Problem\\_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three-Body_Problem_(novel))).
- 2 Yuan Yang, "The three-body phenomenon," *The Economist/The World in 2016*, accessed October 8, 2017, <http://www.theworldin.com/article/10652/three-body-phenomenon>.

*Problem* and its sequels in China, both within their genre and in the wider literary sphere, is demonstrated by how “for many Chinese readers, *Santi* is synonymous with [science fiction],”<sup>3</sup> as well as the fact that “the *Three-Body* trilogy [...] has been credited for single-handedly gaining Chinese science fiction respectability among the Chinese literary establishment.”<sup>4</sup>

Just as noteworthy as the success story of the *The Three-Body Problem* is the story of its author Liu Cixin (刘慈欣, b. 1963), a computer engineer whose literary output has earned him the titles of “China’s foremost science fiction writer”<sup>5</sup> and “the most popular author in the genre” in today’s China.<sup>6</sup> Often described as a writer of “hard”<sup>7</sup> or “neoclassical”<sup>8</sup> science fiction that focuses on scientifically plausible speculation, Liu first encountered the genre through the translated works of such authors as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, reading them in secret during a time when nearly all Western novels were banned in China.<sup>9</sup> For several years of his early childhood, he lived apart from his parents in his family’s ancestral village in Henan Province, as the mining town in Shanxi where they had lived had become unsafe during the Cultural Revolution. In the afterword to the English edition of *The Three-Body Problem*, he describes his impressions of the time before he was sent to Henan: “I remembered gunshots in the middle of the night, trucks passing in the street, filled with men clutching guns and wearing red armbands... But I had been too young

3 Mingwei Song, “Representations of the Invisible: Chinese Science Fiction in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Andrea Bachner, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 548.

4 Ken Liu, “China Dreams: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction,” *Clarkesworld*, December 2014, accessed October 8, 2017, [http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/liu\\_12\\_14/](http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/liu_12_14/).

5 Mingwei Song, “After 1989: The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction,” *China Perspectives* no. 1 (March 2015): 10.

6 Joel Martinsen, “Chinese SF Blasts Off,” *Publishers Weekly* 262:21 (21/2015): 22.

7 Song, “Representations of the Invisible,” 556; Olli Kangassalo, “Kun avaruuden sivilisaatio soittaa, älä vastaa,” *Yle.fi*, August 11, 2017, accessed October 22, 2017, <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2017/08/11/kun-avaruuden-sivilisaatio-soittaa-ala-vastaa>.

8 Liu, “China Dreams,” and Song, “After 1989,” 8; Song, however, disputes the categorization of Liu as a “neoclassical” writer and sees him as a representative of the “new wave” of Chinese science fiction.

9 David Barnett, “‘People hope my book will be China’s Star Wars’: Liu Cixin on China’s exploding sci-fi scene,” *The Guardian*, December 14, 2016, accessed October 15, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/14/liu-cixin-chinese-sci-fi-universal-the-three-body-problem>; Olivia Geng and William Kazer, “Writing China: Cixin Liu, ‘The Three-Body Problem,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 2014, accessed October 15, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/10/31/writing-china-liu-cixin-the-three-body-problem/>.

back then, and I can't be sure whether these images are real memories, or mirages constructed later."<sup>10</sup>

I have brought up this background information on both the novel and its author in order to highlight not only the context in which *The Three-Body Problem* is situated, but also several choices I have made with regards to my treatment of said context in this thesis. First, although the recent literary revival of Chinese science fiction is still very much ongoing, it is already evident that *The Three-Body Problem* is a core part of its contemporary canon. Moreover, seeing as it was written by an author inspired from early on by Western works of its genre, the novel also exists very much in dialogue with science fiction literature on the global level, and has in fact already been recognized for its significant contribution to this field. However, while I consider it important to acknowledge both of these points, my own analysis of *The Three-Body Problem* examines the text from a slightly different perspective, attempting to situate the novel in the wider context of post-Cultural Revolution (mainland) Chinese literature, and of the continuity of modern Chinese literature that preceded it. I have chosen this approach because the themes that I shall discuss here—namely, rationality, fanaticism, and the legacy of the Cultural Revolution—have been highly important topics in the study of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, and because I believe that my own examination of the novel benefits from being linked to these previous discussions. Similar to the *The Three-Body Problem* itself, I shall start with a discussion of a particular situation in Chinese history and move on from there to one involving the potential future of all humankind, hoping that by first rooting my analysis in what is culturally specific in the novel, I will be better able to shed light on how it addresses issues of global (or possibly even universal) relevance.

The action of *The Three-Body Problem* takes place in two time periods. In the 1960s, Ye Wenjie, an astrophysicist and a survivor of the Cultural Revolution, is drafted into a secret Chinese military project meant to establish contact with an extraterrestrial intelligence. In the novel's present, Wang Miao, a nanomaterials researcher, becomes part of a multinational task force aiming to uncover why elite

10 Liu Cixin, author's postscript for the American edition of *The Three Body-Problem*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Tor, 2014), 392.



scientists all across the world are committing suicide, and finds that the answer is connected to both an unusual virtual reality game and to evidence that seems to invalidate our understanding of the fundamental laws of the universe. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that the experiments conducted in the 1960s not only lead to contact with an alien civilization, but also to the establishment of a movement that is collaborating with the aliens to prepare Earth for invasion.

Through its science-fictional plot, *The Three-Body Problem* touches upon such themes as the traumas caused by the Cultural Revolution, ideological fanaticism, and the nature of science and its role in human affairs, as well as humanity's possibilities for survival and hope for the future in what Liu Cixin himself has described as “the worst of all possible universes.”<sup>11</sup> In this thesis, I aim to link all of these themes into a single thread—one that starts with a literary depiction of a concrete historical situation, goes through examinations of its differences and similarities to our current era, and ends with reflections on our unclear future. The questions that I seek to answer are: How does *The Three-Body Problem* depict the Cultural Revolution and how is it contrasted with the post-Mao era of Chinese history? What does the novel tell us of the relationship between fanaticism and rationality? And how does it portray our possibilities of avoiding a new descent into violence, one that might conceivably lead to the destruction of our species itself?

In trying to answer these questions, I shall both make use of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s critical interrogation of enlightenment rationality and examine *The Three-Body Problem* against several phenomena in modern and contemporary Chinese literature (including “scar literature,” “root-seeking literature” and Yibing Huang’s concept of “cultural bastardy”), which I shall introduce as a part of my theoretical background before moving on to my analysis of the novel. Here I shall also briefly look into the relevance of enlightenment values and the legacy of the Cultural Revolution to contemporary Chinese science fiction, including a few previous works by Liu Cixin. In the analysis itself, I shall first examine how *The Three-Body Problem* introduces the theme of conflict between rationality and

11 Liu Cixin, “The Worst of All Possible Universes and the Best of All Possible Earths: Three Body and Chinese Science Fiction,” trans. Ken Liu, *Tor.com*, October 30, 2014, accessed 20 June, 2017, <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2014/10/repost-the-worst-of-all-possible-universes-and-the-best-of-all-possible-earths-three-body-and-chinese-science-fiction>.

fanaticism through its portrayal of the Cultural Revolution as a period of “madness” and the depiction of the character of Ye Zhetai as an exemplar of rationality in a manner reminiscent of scar literature. After that, I shall turn to the way that the novel draws a line between the fanaticism of the Cultural Revolution and the apparently rational utopian ideals used to justify China’s secret project to establish contact with extraterrestrials, and the implicit contradiction between these ideals and the project’s status as a part of the Cold War arms race.

In the third part of my analysis, I shall aim to show how *The Three-Body Problem* questions the idea of the post-Mao period being “a new era” in Chinese history that would allow for a simple return to rationality. Here I shall also argue that through its portrayal of ambiguous characters as emblematic of this period, the novel moves away from the clear-cut characters of scar literature and towards the depiction of “cultural bastards,” who remain “contaminated” by the Cultural Revolution despite their desire to break away from it. I shall continue examining the novel’s exploration of cultural bastardy in the following section, which focuses on the Earth–Trisolaris Organization or ETO (a movement that is working against humankind on behalf of an alien civilization) and a type of fanaticism born out of the “rational consideration” of humankind’s evils, which I see as further complicating the simple dichotomy between rationality and fanaticism introduced at the novel’s beginning.

In the fifth part of my analysis, I shall turn to the theme of destruction of the natural environment, which *The Three-Body Problem* brings up in the context of both the Cultural Revolution period and of the post-Mao era; comparing and contrasting its approach with that of root-seeking writer Ah Cheng’s novella *The King of Trees*, I shall argue that Liu’s novel depicts a world where having any alternative to enlightenment rationality’s instrumental view of nature may have already been made impossible. This dominance of rationality is also the subject of the following section, where it is considered in the context of the rationalization of violence; here, I shall examine the novel’s “Operation Guzheng” against the historical background of the suppression of the pro-democracy protests at Tian’anmen Square in 1989 and argue that it is an example of “the reversion to barbarism” that Adorno and Horkheimer see as the end result of enlightenment.

In the final two sections of the analysis, I shall examine what, in *The Three-Body Problem*, is the ultimate worth of science and rationality. First, I shall argue that although our scientific worldview is ultimately proven to be valid within the

story, it is not shown as able to give us comfort or real control over our destiny. Finally, I shall focus on the final scenes of the novel, where the characters are faced with the possibility of humankind's extinction and have to choose whether to accept it or fight against it. Here, I shall show that despite its pessimism over our ability to create a better world in a hostile universe, *The Three-Body Problem* does offer a glimmer of hope with regards to our future by implying that there still may be alternatives to the path that would lead us to inhumanity and self-destruction, which will lead into my final assessment of the novel as a whole in the conclusions.

In this thesis, Chinese names are transliterated using the *pinyin* system and given in the Chinese order (surname first), apart from cases where another form is used by the author themselves or has otherwise become standard (e.g. David Der-wei Wang instead of Wang Dewei, or Ah Cheng instead of Zhong Acheng). References to *The Three-Body Problem* are primarily to the English translation by Ken Liu, published in 2014, or, when clarification from the Chinese text is needed, to the edition published by Chongqing Press in 2008. In the Chongqing Press version, the first three chapters, which are set during the Cultural Revolution period, have been moved to the middle of the text; the English translation returns the original chapter order.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Ken Liu has stated that he has updated some of the scientific information within the novel in cooperation with Liu Cixin for the translation.<sup>13</sup> I have sought to note any other differences between the two versions when relevant.

As I will discuss in the section on historical interpretations of the Cultural Revolution, there are competing views on the duration of the mass campaign, with the official stance of the Chinese Communist Party defining it as ten-year period beginning in 1966. Although this differs from the interpretation contemporary to the events themselves, according to which the campaign was ended in 1969, the current official definition has become widely accepted in discussions of Chinese literature, and so I shall follow it here. In cases where the distinction between these two

12 Song, "After 1989," 10; "I'm Ken Liu, translator for THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM, AMA," Reddit, accessed March 28, 2016, [www.reddit.com/r/SF\\_Book\\_Club/comments/30xhj0/three\\_im\\_ken\\_liu\\_translator\\_for\\_the\\_threebody/](http://www.reddit.com/r/SF_Book_Club/comments/30xhj0/three_im_ken_liu_translator_for_the_threebody/).

13 Lexi Pandell, "WIRED Book Club: Is *Three-Body Problem*'s Translation Better Than the Original?," *WIRED*, June 20, 2016, accessed October 22, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2016/10/wired-book-club-ken-liu-interview/>.

definitions might be necessary, I shall refer to the three-year period from 1966 to 1969 as the Cultural Revolution proper and to the ten-year period from 1966 to 1976 as the Cultural Revolution in its extended sense.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Rationality, Fanaticism, and Enlightenment

For the purposes of this thesis, I shall understand rationality more or less as a synonym for “reason,” or as the state or quality of being reasonable. “Reason” is defined by the English-language Wikipedia as “the capacity for consciously making sense of things, applying logic, establishing and verifying facts, and changing or justifying practices, institutions, and beliefs based on new or existing information.”<sup>14</sup> Reason or rationality thus conceived held a privileged position in Western Enlightenment philosophy, where its exercise was seen as the means for establishing “a genuinely human social and political order” free from the oppression of unenlightened institutions, with “human beings finally taking individual and collective control over the destiny of the species.”<sup>15</sup> A key manifestation of this

14 Wikipedia contributors, “Reason,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Reason&oldid=775439450>.

15 Andrew Fagan, “Theodor Adorno (1903—1969),” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/adorno/>. In this thesis, the capitalized spelling of “Enlightenment” refers to the historical period and its philosophy, while the non-capitalized one denotes a wider phenomenon examined in

exercise is the scientific method and the pursuit of scientific knowledge, as “the enlightenment tradition since Bacon believes that knowledge is power in the sense that knowledge about nature gives humans the power to manipulate and control nature. Human knowledge and natural reality are assumed to be completely commensurable in principle, so that nothing about nature is in principle unknowable. Knowledge can thus aim at the goal of unified and universal science.”<sup>16</sup>

To find a corresponding preliminary definition of fanaticism, we may again turn to Wikipedia, which tells us that “fanaticism is a belief or behavior involving uncritical zeal or with an obsessive enthusiasm. [...] The fanatic displays very strict standards and little tolerance for contrary ideas or opinions. [...] Religious fanaticism is defined by blind faith, the persecution of dissents and the absence of reality.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, according to the typical understanding of the term, fanaticism is something *contradictory* to reason: the fanatic is, by definition, uninterested in verifying facts and unwilling to accept information that differs from what they believe. Moreover, fanaticism typically leads into *active* intolerance and even violent persecution of those who have different beliefs, whether they themselves are equally fanatical about them or not. As such, it stands to reason that Enlightenment philosophers considered the hold of fanaticism in religion and in society in general to be one of those unenlightened and oppressive institutions that should be overthrown through the use of reason.

Although this adversarial understanding of the relationship between fanaticism and rationality may seem commonsensical, it has also been opposed by a competing view that questions whether rationality is as beneficial as the Enlightenment philosophers assumed. To illustrate these different assessments of reason or rationality, David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy draw attention to the title of Francisco Goya’s etching *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, part of a series dating from 1799. Goya’s phrasing invokes a relationship between reason and the “monsters” symbolizing fantasy, depicted as creatures of darkness in the

the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, which I shall introduce below. In quotations, I have preserved the original capitalization.

16 David Couzens Hoy, “A Deconstructive Reading of the Early Frankfurt School,” in *Critical Theory*, by David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 115.

17 Wikipedia contributors, “Fanaticism,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed May 24, 2017, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fanaticism&oldid=760992840>.

etching, yet the exact nature of this relationship is not necessarily clear from the title itself:

What interests us here is the title's ambiguity, which expresses a widespread ambivalence about Goya's own era, particularly about eighteenth-century ideals of enlightenment. The title can be read as either "The *sleep* of reason produces monsters" or "The *dream* of reason produces monsters." The first and primary reading says that when reason goes to sleep monsters are produced. This slogan of modern enlightenment is flatly contradicted by the second, counterenlightenment reading, which says that the monsters are themselves reasons dreams. On this latter reading, reason is not simply a light opposed to the darkness of fantasy but has its own dark side.<sup>18</sup>

As a representative of this latter, counter-enlightenment reading, I shall here focus on the critical theory of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as presented in their 1947 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Written against the background of World War II, which had forced Horkheimer "to re-examine the hope that the innate rational desires of human beings would lead beyond barbarism to a more humane society," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* extended the scope of critical theory so that

what is to be criticized is not simply a rationalistic conception of science, but the rationalism of the entire modern era. The traditional conception of science becomes merely one more manifestation of a pervasive faith in reason which Horkheimer and Adorno call "enlightenment." The reversion to barbarism by Western bourgeois civilization is explained as the result of "not merely the ideal but the practical tendency to self-destruction" that "has always been characteristic of rationalism."<sup>19</sup>

How does this "enlightenment" (which here does not refer simply to the philosophy of a certain historical period, but rather to a "mode of apprehending reality") lead us

18 David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, introduction to *Critical Theory*, by David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 1; italics in the original.

19 Hoy, "Early Frankfurt School," 114.

to “barbarism,”<sup>20</sup> or inhumane and repressive practices? For Horkheimer and Adorno, it is because “the fundamental aim of enlightenment is the establishment of human sovereignty over material reality, over nature: enlightenment is founded upon the drive to master and control nature.”<sup>21</sup> This necessitates a division of the world into the human mind as the subject and nature as the object of knowledge, ultimately leading to “the establishment of a form of reasoning and a general world-view which appears to exist independently of human beings and, more to the point, is principally characterized by a systematic indifference to human beings and their sufferings: we ultimately become mere objects of the form of reason that we have created.”<sup>22</sup> Enlightenment therefore eventually gives birth to a mode of thought that denies the reality of actual human experience, allowing for the (re-)instatement of repressive practices and eventually resulting in humankind’s self-destruction, in what Adorno would later describe as an “universal history [...] leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.”<sup>23</sup> As such, according to the theory presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, rationality not only cannot safeguard us against fanaticism and its adverse effects, but will in itself ultimately lead to a worldview that may be considered functionally indistinguishable from it.

## 2.2 The Pursuit of Modernity and Rationality in Chinese Literature

To find the link between enlightenment ideals of rationality and Chinese literature, one needs to simply look to the pursuit of modernity that has concerned Chinese writers since the May Fourth movement of 1919 (and even earlier). As Li Tuo notes, defining modernity is no easy task, since although “many commentators

20 The term “barbarism” is used by Horkheimer and Adorno in its Marxist sense as referring to either a state of social oppression or a civilizational collapse resulting from the development of capitalism. However, because of its history of being applied to describe the cultures of non-European “Others,” I shall use the word only in quotes.

21 Fagan, “Theodor Adorno.”

22 Fagan, “Theodor Adorno.”

23 Quoted in Hoy, “Early Frankfurt School,” 116.



follow Max Weber's formulation, identifying the emergence and spread of modernity with the process of social rationalization," "modernity" technically also includes "almost everything that has developed and accumulated with the process of modernization in the West."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, as Weber's formulation suggests, there is a strong connection between faith in rationality, or enlightenment ideals in general, and the pursuit of modernity, which has been evident in China as well as the West. Xiaobin Yang, for example, states that "if, for Chinese intellectuals, to be modern means to emulate (materially) advanced and/or (spiritually) progressive civilizations [...], the concept of modernity in twentieth-century Chinese literature is naturally related to the intellectual concern for such issues as enlightenment, individual/national emancipation, and historical progress."<sup>25</sup> Yibing Huang describes the project of modernity started by the May Fourth movement as "highly charged with Western Enlightenment ideologies,"<sup>26</sup> while Leo Ou-fan Lee goes into more detail, explaining that

the "modern" outlook of May Fourth intellectuals also evinced some strong traces of what Calinescu calls the "bourgeois idea of modernity," which may be regarded as a direct descendant of the post-Renaissance view buttressed by ideas of Enlightenment and the development of the Industrial Revolution: "the doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time... the cult of reason, and the ideal of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success."<sup>27</sup>

24 Li Tuo, "Resistance to Modernity: Reflections on Mainland Chinese Literary Criticism in the 1980s," trans. Marshall MacArthur and Han Chen, in *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*, ed. Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 143–144. Here, Li also deals with several difficulties in defining modernity, especially in the Chinese context.

25 Yang, Xiaobin, "Whence and Whither the Postmodern/Post-Mao-Deng: Historical Subjectivity and Literary Subjectivity in Modern China," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 379.

26 Yibing Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

27 Lee, Leo Ou-fan, "In Search of Modernity: Some Reflections on a New Mode of Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Chinese History and Literature," in *Ideas Across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz*, ed. Paul A.

As the Chinese Communist Party considers the May Fourth movement to be its ideological precursor, these ideals of modernity and rationality have also been widely invoked throughout the history of the People's Republic of China. This is clearly evidenced by such rhetoric as calls for “the four modernizations” (四个现代化 *si ge xiandaihua*) in the 1970s and 1980s and talk about the “scientific outlook on development” (科学发展观 *kexue fazhanguan*), which was incorporated into the CCP constitution in 2007.

Throughout this century-long pursuit of modernity, there have naturally also been voices that have asked whether the spread of rationality could truly bring about genuine progress in China. To focus on only one example, we may briefly look at David Der-wei Wang's reading of Jiang Gui's (姜贵, 1908–1980) anti-Communist novel *A Tale of Modern Monsters* (今樗枰传 *Jin taowu zhuan*), published in Taiwan in 1957 (and later republished under its original title, 旋风 *Xuanfeng* or *The Whirlwind*). In Wang's interpretation, the central question of the novel is “if the search for rationality constitutes a major part of China's modernity project, how does one come to terms with the plague of irrationalities that spread across China in the first half of the modern century?”<sup>28</sup> While in *A Tale of Modern Monsters* these irrationalities occur in a small town taken over by Communists, Wang stresses that the novel is not just a partisan attack against the political opponents of Taiwan's Nationalists, but that by depicting how the good intentions of his Communist protagonists lead to horrific results, “Jiang Gui calls attention to the paradox of the modernity of evil: the most spectacular horror can be carried out in the name of the most magnificent claims to rationality.”<sup>29</sup>

Like David Hoy, Wang invokes the counter-enlightenment interpretation of Goya's famous phrase, stating that “by Jiang Gui's time it has become more and more difficult to tell dream from reason, and harder than ever to tell which dreams are monstrous and which are reasonable.”<sup>30</sup> For my purposes here, however, the

Cohen and Merle Goldman, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Council on East Asian Studies, 1990), 124.

28 David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 195.

29 Wang, *The Monster That Is History*, 210.

30 Wang, *The Monster That Is History*, 223.

period that is the most relevant to the pursuit of rationality in Chinese literature is the one that began several years after *A Tale of Modern Monsters* was published and that has often been considered the most irrational in modern Chinese history: Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution.

## 2.3 The Dominant Narrative on the Cultural Revolution in China

According to the official Chinese interpretation of the events, which was confirmed by the Chinese Communist Party in 1981, the Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 until Mao Zedong's death and the arrest of the "Gang of Four" in 1976. This interpretation holds that the campaign was the manifestation of a power struggle and a purge within the CCP leadership, and ultimately the result of the machinations of Mao's allies (the aforementioned Gang of Four) and his own erroneous leftist thinking.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the 1981 resolution also emphasized that the "mistake" of the Cultural Revolution had come about due to errors in Mao's judgment, not his ideological thought; in fact, the resolution claimed, Mao's achievements had been much greater than his mistakes, and his ideas would continue to guide the CCP's policies even after his death.<sup>32</sup>

Regardless of one's stance on the correctness of Mao's ideology, there are several reasons to doubt the historical accuracy of the above account. One of the most significant is the campaign's stated duration, as the Cultural Revolution was officially ended by the 9th National Congress of the CCP in April, 1969.<sup>33</sup> This discrepancy is explained by the reformist political agenda of Mao's successors: by retroactively extending the campaign's duration to 1976, the CCP was able to assert that all of Mao's policies during his final years in power were a part of his "great mistake" and that their dismantling was therefore justified. Another reason is that the 1981 resolution does not acknowledge the campaign's wider social background and

31 Lauri Paltemaa and Juha A. Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus), 167.

32 Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 283–284.

33 Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 169 and 209.

its roots in Chinese society outside of the party leadership, including the crisis in local governance that had followed the Great Leap Forward and the social discontent that it had caused (which also inspired Mao to develop further his ideas about continuing the revolutionary struggle within socialism and to therefore create the ideological justifications for the new mass campaign). As Lauri Paltemaa and Juha Vuori emphasize, the Cultural Revolution involved the eruption of long-standing and deep tensions in Chinese society, and those who participated in the campaign were often motivated by genuine dissatisfaction with the system and were not simply manipulated to involve themselves in an intra-party power struggle.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to this official interpretation of history, accounts of the Cultural Revolution have been characterized by a narrative in which the mass campaign was an exceptionally dark period for culture, science and human progress in general. Yibing Huang, for example, makes note of post-Cultural Revolution China's "totalistic assumption that the Cultural Revolution had been a pure dark age during which no real literature had been produced,"<sup>35</sup> while Sigrid Schmalzer asserts that "historical accounts of science in twentieth-century China typically have little good to say of the Cultural Revolution—and often little at all. Perhaps even more than in other fields, the Cultural Revolution in science is seen as a ten-year gap, a time when political struggles interfered with or even put a stop entirely to scientific work."<sup>36</sup> More generally, to many both in China and the West, the mass campaign was (quite understandably) marked first and foremost by the political persecution endured by millions of Chinese. For example, when discussing criticisms of Ah Cheng's depiction of the period, Bonnie S. McDougall states that "at the height of political repression during the Cultural Revolution [...] almost any non-'revolutionary' activity was automatically anti-revolutionary. [...] It is true, though often unacknowledged, that for many people the Cultural Revolution was merely an unpleasant or even occasionally enjoyable passage in their lives that could be endured and forgotten. For many others, however, innocent or not, it brought

34 Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 167–169.

35 Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 4.

36 Sigrid Schmalzer, "Labor Created Humanity: Cultural Revolution Science on Its Terms," in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, edited by Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 185. Schmalzer's analysis attempts to re-examine this narrative by taking into account the view that the practice of science should be a socialist endeavor, which was dominant during the Cultural Revolution in its extended sense.

beatings, rape, imprisonment, torture, and execution.”<sup>37</sup> Liu Cixin himself has expressed a similarly negative view of the Cultural Revolution, explaining his decision to feature it in *The Three-Body Problem* by saying that “the Cultural Revolution provides the necessary background for the story. The tale I wanted to tell demanded a protagonist who gave up all hope in humanity and human nature. I think the only episode in modern Chinese history capable of generating such a response is the Cultural Revolution. It was such a dark and absurd time that even dystopias like *1984* seem lacking in imagination in comparison.”<sup>38</sup>

From the above, it can be seen that in contemporary China, the Cultural Revolution is primarily viewed as a period of ideological fanaticism, political persecution and anti-scientific thinking. In addition, we should note the CCP’s emphasis on the idea that the mass campaign was an isolated “mistake” and not an example of a deeper problem in its (supposedly scientific) ideology. It is this claim that the Cultural Revolution was somehow separate from the continuity of modern Chinese history that we find variously affirmed and challenged in post-Cultural Revolution literature.

## 2.4 Scar Literature

“Scar literature” (伤痕文学 *shanghen wenxue*), also translated as “literature of the scarred” or “wound literature,” was both the first major mainland Chinese literary movement of the post-Mao period and the first to deal with the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Succinctly defined by Schmalzer as “personal stories of people psychologically oppressed, physically tortured, and not infrequently, killed during the Cultural Revolution,”<sup>39</sup> scar literature “dwelled on the mental or physical scars”<sup>40</sup>

37 McDougall, afterword to *The King of Trees*, by Ah Cheng (New York: New Directions, 2010), 191.

38 Preston Grassmann, “The Three-Body Problem and beyond — a Q&A with Liu Cixin,” *Nature Future Conditional*, August 19, 2016, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://blogs.nature.com/futureconditional/2016/08/19/the-three-body-problem-and-beyond-a-qa-with-liu-cixin/>.

39 Schmalzer, “Labor Created Humanity,” 186.

40 Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hurst, 1997), 333.

left by the mass campaign. Through the invocation of these scars, scar literature condemned the injustices visited upon Chinese people during the period, aiming to “examine Chinese people’s ideological fanaticism and call for the rejuvenation of humanistic consciousness.”<sup>41</sup> As such, the protagonists of scar literature were frequently scientists and other intellectuals, whom these works typically compared favorably to both radical youth and uneducated workers.<sup>42</sup>

Although the term “scar literature” originates with Lu Xinhua’s (卢新华, b. 1953) short story the “The Scar” (伤痕 *Shanghen*) in 1978, the critical examination of the Cultural Revolution had already been started by Liu Xinwu (刘心武, b. 1942) with the 1977 story “The Class Teacher” (班主任 *Ban zhuren*), which Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie have described as the “keynote for the new literature” and “the first story officially published in China to expose the damage inflicted on young people by the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>43</sup> The influence of this new type of literature was enormous, with Lu Xinhua and Liu Xinwu becoming “overnight celebrities”<sup>44</sup> and “The Scar” in particular “triggering a phenomenal trend toward soul-searching through writing about the atrocities of the revolution,” despite its “crude style and melodramatic plot.”<sup>45</sup> Notably, few critiques of scar literature were published during the movement’s heyday, an indication of its resonance with the anti-Cultural Revolution political mood of the time.<sup>46</sup>

Though a significant first step in post-Cultural Revolution literary history, scar literature was quickly surpassed in innovativeness by more experimental genres in the mainland Chinese literary sphere, and its literary value has been frequently called into question by both Chinese and foreign critics. McDougall and Louie, for example, describe scar literature’s analysis of the Cultural Revolution’s causes as “superficial” and state that (with the exception of Liu Xinwu) “few of its writers or works survived the immediate need for fictional denunciations of the recent past.”<sup>47</sup>

41 David Der-wei Wang, introduction to *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*, ed. Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), xxiv.

42 Schmalzer, “Labor Created Humanity,” 186; McDougall and Louie, *The Literature of China*, 392.

43 Wang, *The Monster That Is History*, 173; McDougall and Louie, *The Literature of China*, 333 and 391.

44 McDougall and Louie, *The Literature of China*, 333.

45 Wang, *The Monster That Is History*, 174.

46 McDougall and Louie, *The Literature of China*, 333.

47 McDougall and Louie, *The Literature of China*, 333 and 370.

To Li Tuo, on the other hand, scar literature does not “represent anything new in mainland Chinese literature,”<sup>48</sup> while Li Qingxi claims that it “basically continued the conventions of the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>49</sup> David Der-wei Wang goes even further, noting that scar literature shares its major preoccupations not only with both the pro- and anti-Communist literature of the 1950s, but also with even earlier socially progressive Chinese literature, which was “marked by slogans such as ‘literature of tears and blood’ and ‘literature for the insulted and the injured.’”<sup>50</sup> An even more significant criticism is that instead of truly breaking away from the Cultural Revolution, scar literature may in fact have simply re-enacted Maoist purges in verbal form: “Critics have noted that scar literature, despite its avowed purpose of repudiating Maoist tyranny, may still be using a narratology all too reminiscent of Maoist literature. By delivering accusations against the Maoist regime, scar writers may have unwittingly recharged the discourse they meant to abandon.”<sup>51</sup> As such, it seems questionable if scar literature could truly function as a literature of healing that would help the Chinese people move onwards from the Cultural Revolution.

## 2.5 Root-Seeking Literature

In the mid-1980s, scar literature was followed by the “root-seeking” (寻根 *xungen*) movement, which according to Wang “ended up becoming a forceful critique of the aesthetic as well as ideological dogmas of official literature” and through its interplay with avant-garde literature became part of “the most remarkable achievement of the post-Mao modernist movement.”<sup>52</sup> To writers such as Han Shaogong (韩少功, b. 1953), who coined the term, root-seeking meant “seeking oneself in the deep spirit of one’s people and cultural essence.”<sup>53</sup> Their work not only

48 Li, “Resistance to Modernity,” 140.

49 Li Qingxi, “Searching for Roots: Anticultural Return in Mainland Chinese Literature of the 1980s,” trans. Charles Laughlin, in *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*, ed. Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 110.

50 Wang, introduction, xxiv–xxv.

51 Wang, introduction, xxv.

52 Wang, introduction, xxviii.

53 Li Qingxi, “Searching for Roots,” 110.

set off an interest in primitivism and traditional Chinese culture, but also complicated the relationship between Chinese literature of the time and the political project of modernization, although there were naturally differences between the ways that individual writers approached the question of “modernity.”<sup>54</sup> To Ah Cheng (阿城, real name 钟阿城 Zhong Acheng, b. 1949), for example, “Chinese ‘modern consciousness’ had to come out of the entire culture of the (Chinese) people,” while some critics associated with the movement focused more on “the collision of Eastern and Western cultures and the problems of fusing modern consciousness with traditional culture.”<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the authors of scar literature, root-seeking writers also had a more ambiguous relationship to the Cultural Revolution. Ah Cheng, for example, has been widely criticized for presenting escapism as a viable option for surviving the period, yet according to McDougall his stories also “reject the official political and moral values of the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>56</sup> This ambiguity may be due to an irony that underlies the works of these authors: as Wang notes, “most root-seeking writers [...] derived their nativist imaginations not from their hometown memories but rather from their experience as ‘educated youth’ [...] during the Cultural Revolution. Thus, ironically, their stories of ‘roots’ are often accounts of a generation of youth *uprooted* from their cultural and ethical heritage; their nostalgia indicates not so much a sentimental remembrance of things past as melancholic effort to re-member an age betrayed by political illusions.”<sup>57</sup>

In addition to its understanding of the Cultural Revolution, an interesting aspect of root-seeking literature was the skeptical stance that at least some writers associated with the movement held towards the dominance of rationality. In some

54 Li Tuo, “Resistance to Modernity,” 140–141.

55 Li Qingxi, “Searching for Roots,” 111–112. It might be noted that McDougall and Louie seem more reluctant to consider Ah Cheng as a representative member of the root-seeking movement than the other critics cited here, as they seem to have a more negative view of root-seeking literature in general: “Because of his debts to traditional Chinese culture, Ah Cheng is usually included among the ‘root-seeking’ writers but he avoids their excessive emphasis on violence and brutality.” (McDougall and Louie, *The Literature of China*, 401.)

56 McDougall, afterword, 191–192.

57 Wang, introduction, xxviii–xxix; italics in the original. While the majority of root-seeking writers may have been “educated youth,” many works of “educated youth literature” (知青文学 *zhiqing wenxue*) fit more clearly under the umbrella of scar literature. See Arponen, *Kiinan ”menetetty sukupolvi” – maalle lähetetyt nuoret* (MA thesis, University of Helsinki, 2004), 47 and 52.



cases this willingness to look to outside the realm of rationality for answers was quite explicit, such as in literary critic Wu Liang's (吴亮) demand that "the mysterious worlds outside the halo of reason should be explored."<sup>58</sup> More generally, Li Qingxi states that to the root-seeking writers, "the images rendered by Western modernist writers, regardless of how they may be distorted, are always presented as a kind of explanation or cognition of the objective world. The quest for roots resists the production of art as a cognitive tool."<sup>59</sup> Even based on Li's cursory description, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that this kind of resistance is based on a similar suspicion towards reducing the (natural) world into an object of knowledge as Adorno and Horkheimer's criticism of enlightenment thought. However, true to the respective differences between individual root-seeking writers and the ambiguity of their work, it is much more difficult to present a consensus picture of root-seeking literature than of scar literature. As such, in this thesis I will focus on Ah Cheng's novella *The King of Trees* as a representative of the movement, as it shares with *The Three-Body Problem* the subject matter of environmental destruction during the Cultural Revolution and the wider theme of humankind's relation to nature.

## 2.6 Cultural Bastardy

Writing in 1997, McDougall and Louie stated that "current orthodoxy in China draws an absolute line between the literature of the Cultural Revolution and that which succeeded it, dubbed 'new era literature.'"<sup>60</sup> Liu Xinwu, for example, claimed in 1989 that "because it was re-created from the ruins and corpse of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese literature between 1977 and 1980 is like the encounter between a sperm of a primitive life form and an egg so as to conceive a new life."<sup>61</sup> As noted earlier, however, many critics have pointed out that there is in fact a strong continuity between Cultural Revolution literature and its successors, one that is especially evident in the case of scar literature. One of these critics, Yibing Huang,

58 Li Qingxi, "Searching for Roots," 112.

59 Li Qingxi, "Searching for Roots," 115.

60 McDougall and Louie, *The Literature of China*, 344.

61 Quoted in Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 4.

has seen this continuity as being indicative of “a common obsession: to break with the past and tradition, to be completely new,” which originates at the very start of the Chinese modernity project. On the national level, breaking with the past means remaking China into “a new modern nation”; on the individual level, it means giving birth to “‘a new man,’ one who is not contaminated or burdened by the malaise of the past and tradition.” This “new man,” whom Huang also calls “an orphan of history,” is contrasted with the “cultural bastard” who is still tied to the past due to their “contaminated, impure, and illegitimate origin.”<sup>62</sup>

In post-Cultural Revolution literature, the “common obsession” of a break with the past has manifested in the previously-mentioned assumption that the Cultural Revolution was a pure literary dark age, and that the years that followed it correspondingly indicated a new beginning and a chance to resume the May Fourth project of modernity (which, as noted, was “highly charged with Western Enlightenment ideologies”). Huang, however, seeks to “challenge the often-sanitized and too-neat picture of the post-Cultural Revolution literature and to restore the bastard origins of the supposed orphans of history” and claims that even the equation of modernity with historical discontinuity is in itself evidence of a continuity between the dominant ideology of the post-Cultural Revolution period and Maoism, which after all sought to tear down the “four olds” (old ideas, culture, customs and habits) and to raise a generation of “socialist new men.” In his estimation, the Cultural Revolution has therefore “marked contemporary Chinese literature with not just a scar, but with a brand of bastardy,” making its legacy impossible to dismiss through merely repudiating it.<sup>63</sup>

To demonstrate the mass campaign’s influence on post-Cultural Revolution literature, Huang sketches out a collective “bildungsroman” for the Red Guard generation, who had been led to believe that they were the “socialist new men” that would become the vanguards of world revolution. In the end, their eventual fate of being “sent down” to the countryside on Mao’s orders caused the former Red Guards to become disillusioned with the Cultural Revolution and Maoism, leading to “their transformation from the legitimate successors of the revolutionary cause or the future masters of the nation to illegitimate ‘bastards’ who would have to search for a new

62 Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 2.

63 Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 4–5.

pattern of individual development for themselves,” or in other words into “a generation of ‘bastards’ grown out of the Cultural Revolution and yet lost in history.” According to Huang, it was in fact this key experience of disillusionment that would inform the works of underground writers such as Bei Dao (北岛, b. 1949) and Duo Duo (多多, b. 1951) as they rebelled against the ideological dictates of the mass campaign.<sup>64</sup>

As might be expected from someone whose analysis emphasizes continuity in Chinese literature, Huang notes that the tension between the “cultural bastard” and the “new man” appeared as soon as calls for the latter to be born were first made, raising as an example Lu Xun’s (鲁迅, real name 周树人 Zhou Shuren, 1881–1936) short story “A Madman’s Diary” (狂人日记 *Kuangren riji*), published in 1918. Interestingly, in Huang’s interpretation the eponymous madman’s final call to “save the children” (from succumbing to the practice of cannibalism that permeates all history) in fact “conceals a deeply rooted doubt, perhaps unconscious, about the utopian prospects of a Chinese modernity possessing an uncontaminated and pure origin” and “illustrates the impossibility of tearing madness apart from the Enlightenment rationality embodied by modern individual subjectivity.” Based on this reading, Huang suggests that “although constantly calling for the birth of the ‘new man,’ Lu Xun could not so easily hold the faith that he himself would be qualified for such a title.”<sup>65</sup> If this interpretation is correct, it would mean that the entwinement of rationality and irrationality depicted by Jiang Gui had in fact already been foreseen by Lu Xun at the start of the Chinese modernity project, raising further questions of whether rationality could lead to the progress promised by the May Fourth movement and its ideological successors.

64 Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 9–10. Huang’s “bildungsroman” appears similar to literary historian Yang Jian’s outline of the experiences of “educated youth,” which is summarized in Arponen, *Kiinan ”menetetty sukupolvi,”* 48. This outline consists of participation in a collective illusion (the Cultural Revolution), searching for an explanation for one’s belief in the illusion, and searching for someone to blame for what happened. Arponen adds that since openly evaluating the Cultural Revolution in general has not been possible, the former “educated youth” have had to consider this last question amongst themselves.

65 Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 2–3.

## 2.7 Enlightenment Ideals, the Cultural Revolution, and Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction

For much of its history, Chinese science fiction can be said to have fully embraced enlightenment's faith in rationality, progress and modernization. Science fiction author and scholar Xia Jia (夏笳, real name 王瑶 Wang Yao, b. 1984) has noted that "when the genre was first introduced via translation to China at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was mostly treated as fantasies and dreams of modernity," which linked it to the project later undertaken by the May Fourth movement and its successors.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Mingwei Song writes that in the science fiction of the late Qing period, "the scientific 'novum' [...] crystallises utopianism in concrete images of a future that is advanced equally in science, morality, and political life," a template that would inform the later revivals of the genre in China.<sup>67</sup> According to Song, the conventions of Chinese science fiction were in fact "dominated by political utopianism and technological optimism throughout nearly the entire twentieth century,"<sup>68</sup> a state of affairs that was upheld by political censorship, such as the campaign against "spiritual pollution" in the mid-1980s that stopped Chinese writers from experimenting with dystopian fiction, and by the official classification of science fiction as a sub-genre of children's literature.<sup>69</sup>

However, while optimism may have been dominant in the past, the "new wave" of Chinese science fiction that (according to Song's definition) began in 1989 has significantly diversified perspectives towards enlightenment ideals within the genre. In the current field of Chinese science fiction literature, there is "a range of attitudes toward humanity's future among the writers: some are pessimistic, believing that we're powerless against irresistible trends; some are hopeful that

66 Xia Jia, "What Makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?," trans. Ken Liu, *Tor.com*, July 22, 2014, accessed October 4, 2017, [www.tor.com/2014/07/22/what-makes-chinese-science-fiction-chinese/](http://www.tor.com/2014/07/22/what-makes-chinese-science-fiction-chinese/). The translations were soon followed by Chinese works, with Liang Qichao's (梁启超, 1873–1929) political novel *Future of New China* (新中国未来记 *Xin Zhongguo weilai ji*, 1902) often cited as the origin of Chinese science fiction (Song, "After 1989," 7).

67 Song, "After 1989," 7. The "novum," Song notes, is a concept which refers to "novel things that create estrangement in science fiction," developed by the influential science fiction scholar Darko Suvin.

68 Song, "Representations of the Invisible," 549.

69 Song, "After 1989," 7.

human ingenuity will ultimately triumph; still others resort to ironic observation of the absurdities of life.”<sup>70</sup> While there are still authors who profess their faith in science and rationality, it can be said that compared to the past, contemporary writers such as Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆, b. 1981) are more likely to acknowledge that “behind the practice of science lie ideological struggles, fights over power and authority, and the profit motive” and that “the history of science is written and rewritten by the allocation and flow of capital, favors given to some projects but not others, and the needs of war.”<sup>71</sup> As such, we should bear in mind that contemporary Chinese fiction contains a multitude of different perspectives on enlightenment ideologies, and while *The Three-Body Problem* may help us understand some of them, we should not generalize too much on the basis of a single novel.

In the same way that it is difficult to describe Chinese science fiction writers’ attitudes towards enlightenment ideals except in terms of their plurality, it is difficult to characterize contemporary Chinese science fiction’s relationship to Maoism and the Cultural Revolution except in terms of its ambiguity. First, we must remember that there are naturally major generational differences between those writers who experienced Mao’s era firsthand and those who were born after the start of China’s economic reforms, the latter of whom the veteran science fiction writer Han Song (韩松, b. 1965) has described as belonging to a “torn generation” whose members hold a multitude of wildly different values.<sup>72</sup> It is for this reason that I shall draw my examples from writings of the first group (of which Liu Cixin himself is a member), without attempting to compare them to the works of younger authors. Moreover, the continuing political sensitivity of Mao’s legacy provides ample reason for authors not to comment directly on the topic, or to stay within the bounds of officially sanctioned interpretations of history when doing so; therefore, although we have no cause to doubt the sincerity of such statements as Liu’s description of the Cultural

70 Xia Jia, “What Makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?”

71 Chen Qiufan, “The Torn Generation: Chinese Science Fiction in a Culture in Transition,” trans. Ken Liu, *Tor.com*, May 15, 2014, accessed October 20, 2017, <https://www.tor.com/2014/05/15/the-torn-generation-chinese-science-fiction-in-a-culture-in-transition/>.

72 Chen, “The Torn Generation.” In his essay Chen, who belongs to the newer generation of writers, accepts Han Song’s description in general terms but questions the latter’s assumption that “the torn generation” must regard the future of China in pessimistic terms.

Revolution as a “dark and absurd time,” it would be premature to take them as exhaustive answers to questions about these authors’ relationship to Mao and his revolution.

Despite the above-mentioned restrictions that China’s political system places on examinations of the country’s recent past, the works of currently active science fiction writers have included quite a few echoes from Mao’s period. Mingwei Song notes that while none of the “Big Three” authors of Liu Cixin, Han Song and Wang Jinkang (王晋康, b. 1948)<sup>73</sup> openly claim to admire Mao, “Mao’s spectre often follows their characters in scientific experiments or space odysseys.” In Liu’s case, this was already apparent in his first novel, *China 2185* (中国 2185 *Zhongguo 2185*), which has only been circulated on the Internet and tells the story of the resurrection of Mao’s consciousness in virtual reality; according to Song, in this novel as well as elsewhere in Chinese science fiction, “the formidable spectre of Mao stands for diehard utopianism.”<sup>74</sup> Another example of this utopianism can be found in Wang Jinkang’s novel *Ant Life* (蚁生 *Yisheng*, 2007), where a scientist attempts to build a perfect society by extracting a chemical that promotes altruism from ants and administering it to the inhabitants of a rural village. Like the Cultural Revolution, the experiment eventually ends in failure as the new ant-people form a hierarchical society and become violent towards outsiders, but at the same time the novel contrasts the scientist’s belief in the moral necessity of altruism with the selfishness and inequality prevalent in post-Mao China.<sup>75</sup> Although Song notes that “there is a touch of political apathy in most of [Liu Cixin’s] works,”<sup>76</sup> Adrian Thieret sees similar social criticism in Liu’s short story “Taking Care of God” (赡养上帝 *Shanyang shangdi*, 2005), where both the abandonment of “the socialist ideal of

73 While this definition of the “Big Three” is common among Chinese science fiction fans (see e.g. Liu, “China Dreams”), it does not appear to be universally followed. In a panel discussion titled “Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction and Where to Find Them” at the 75th World Science Fiction Convention (Helsinki, August 11, 2017), Xia Jia listed the “Big Three” as Liu, Wang and He Xi (何夕, b. 1971), and put Han Song into a category of his own (as the “only” or “lonely” Han Song) because of the perceived dissimilarities between his work and most other Chinese science fiction.

74 Song, “After 1989,” 9. *China 2185* is also the novel that Mingwei Song identifies as “the first work of the new wave of Chinese [science fiction] that contains a self-conscious effort to energise utopian/dystopian variations rather than serving as a simple denial of utopianism or a total embrace of dystopian disillusionment.” (Song, “After 1989,” 8.)

75 Song, “After 1989,” 9.

76 Song, “Representations of the Invisible,” 556.

human liberation” and the neglect of traditional Confucian morals are highlighted as problems of contemporary Chinese society.<sup>77</sup> In sum, what these particular stories have in common is that, while their authors may condemn Mao’s “great mistake,” they nevertheless seem to portray the utopian and equality-oriented ideals of China’s recent past as having something to offer to the country’s future.

To understand the ambiguities in how these writers have dealt with Mao’s legacy in their works, it may be useful to return to Huang’s theory of cultural bastardy. Although Wang Jinkang is the only one among the “Big Three” who was once a sent-down youth (and as such a part of the generation that Huang focuses on), Liu Cixin and Wang Jinkang also lived through the Cultural Revolution, and might therefore be described as “contaminated” by it. This burden is explicitly acknowledged by Liu in his postscript for the English edition of *The Three Body Problem*, where his language recalls both the image of the scar and the yearning to break free from the past that Huang describes:

Through the medium of science fiction, I seek only to create my own worlds using the power of imagination [...] but I cannot escape and leave behind reality, just like I cannot leave behind my shadow. Reality brands each of us with its indelible mark. Every era puts invisible shackles on those who have lived through it, and I can only dance in my chains.<sup>78</sup>

Based on these remarks, while it may indeed be said that “for Liu Cixin, [a science fiction story] is not intended to be an allegory of national experience” and even that his works “show tendencies of transcending China’s contemporary political reality and looking beyond the horizon of our own time,”<sup>79</sup> it is also true that the ghosts of past and present realities have a tendency to follow even those who would wish to enter the realm of pure speculation. It is this tension between the desire to step

77 Adrian Thieret, “Society and Utopia in Liu Cixin,” *China Perspectives* no. 1 (March 2015): 39. As Xia Jia notes, the shock inflicted upon China’s traditions (which include “both the old ways of life in rural China as well as the country’s past equality-oriented socialist ideology”) was due to the new demand of “the application of market principles to all aspects of social life,” or in other words the demand for “economic rationality” (Xia Jia, “What Makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?”).

78 Liu Cixin, author’s postscript for the American edition of *The Three Body Problem*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Tor, 2014), 394.

79 Song, “Representations of the Invisible,” 556.

unencumbered into the future and the impossibility of leaving behind the burdens of the past that I also believe to be central to understanding the questions that Liu Cixin examines in *The Three-Body Problem*.



## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 “The Madness Years”: Introducing the Cultural Revolution in *The Three-Body Problem*

The story of *The Three-Body Problem* begins in the year 1967, with China already in the throes of the Cultural Revolution. In a chapter called “The Madness Years” (疯狂年代 *Fengkuang niandai*), we are first given a description of a bloody battle between two Red Guard factions, with a group of battle-hardened veterans facing against “crazier than crazy” newcomers, who have rigged the building they are defending with explosives and threaten to blow up both themselves and their enemies.<sup>80</sup> The scene ends in the death of one foolhardy female member of the latter group, after which the rest of the chapter focuses on a “struggle session” (a public rally where supposed enemies of the revolution are abused so that they will confess their crimes) held at the exercise grounds of Tsinghua University. (Both the battle

80 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Tor, 2014), 9. As noted before, this chapter and the two following ones have been moved to a later part of the text in some Chinese editions; in Liu, *Santi* (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2008), the chapter starts on page 58.

and the struggle session are noted as being only two of the countless that are taking place during this period.) In this particular session, the accused is Ye Zhetai, a professor of physics whose crime was teaching reactionary ideas. His accusers consist of two of his own students and four female junior high school students, along with his wife Shao Lin, forced to testify against her husband; witnessing the struggle session from the crowd, as we find out later in the chapter, is their daughter Ye Wenjie.

During the struggle session, Ye Zhetai (who has so far “refused to repent, to kill himself, or to become numb”)<sup>81</sup> calmly defends his choice of curriculum using logic and reason, and refuses to back down from his commitment to relying on the best available scientific knowledge. He is, in fact, so in control of himself that he seems to treat his show trial more like a class in physics or a friendly debate, at one point answering a question asked by one of the younger Red Guards “the way he would answer a question from any curious young person”<sup>82</sup> and at another managing to render his accusers speechless through his argumentation:

“Should philosophy guide experiments, or should experiments guide philosophy?” [...]

“Of course it should be the correct philosophy of Marxism that guides scientific experiments!” one of the male Red Guards finally said.

“Then that’s equivalent to saying that the correct philosophy falls out of the sky. This is against the idea that truth emerges from experience. It’s counter to the principles of how Marxism seeks to understand nature.”

Shao Lin and the two college student Red Guards had no answer for this. Unlike the Red Guards who were still in junior high school, they couldn’t completely ignore logic.<sup>83</sup>

This rhetorical victory, however, proves to be short-lived: after Ye Zhetai refuses to rule out the existence of God, saying that there is no scientific evidence to prove the matter one way or another, the younger Red Guards beat him to death with their belts. Witnessing the murder causes both Shao Lin and Ye Wenjie to suffer mental

81 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 13.

82 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 18.

83 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 17.

breakdowns; the first breaks into hysterical laughter and the latter screams until she goes into a withdrawn, emotionless state, in which she wanders to the house of Ruan Wen, her adviser and close confidante. The chapter ends after Ye Wenjie discovers that Ruan is also dead, having been driven to suicide by the Red Guards.

The depiction of the Cultural Revolution found in this first chapter follows the conventions set by scar literature in several respects. The first and most obvious is the focus on physical and mental wounds and scars, including both the punishments inflicted on Ye Zhetai and the psychological damage suffered by his wife and daughter. The second is the valorization of intellectuals, especially in comparison to radical youth. During the struggle session, Ye Zhetai maintains a saint-like calmness in adversity, holding on to his faith in science and rationality until the very end and displaying little animosity towards the Red Guards. In contrast, the youngest (and the least educated) of Ye's tormentors are portrayed as violent and bloodthirsty, reveling in the violence they inflict; even as the omniscient narrator shifts to their viewpoint, it is done mostly to show their near-delusional belief in their own heroism.<sup>84</sup> This directly leads us to the third feature of scar literature that seems to characterize the text: the reliance on an accusatory narratology reminiscent of Maoist literature. By indulging in the demonization of its antagonists, the novel seems to come perilously close to (in Wang's terms) recharging the discourse on display at the mass struggle session even while attempting to repudiate its horrors, and therefore threatens to fall into the trap pointed out by the critics of scar literature.

There is, however, one early indication that the situation here is more complex. As mentioned above, Ye Zhetai is not the first victim of the Cultural Revolution whose fate is shown in this chapter: instead, this distinction belongs to the female Red Guard in the opening battle, who is later heavily implied to have been Ye Wenxue, Ye Zhetai's youngest daughter.<sup>85</sup> The yet unnamed Wenxue is first

84 In addition to their age, the gender of these particular Red Guards should be noted here: as Qingbo Xu points out in her analysis of Zhang Kangkang's work, women's aggression has historically been stigmatized and pathologized by treating it as a sign of irrationality (Qingbo Xu, *The Evolutionary Feminism of Zhang Kangkang and the Developing Dialogue between Darwinism and Gender Studies* (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2014), 139).

85 The two are suggested to be the one and the same when, during a hallucination caused by hypothermia two years after struggle session, Ye Wenjie sees a girl matching the

shown here as “the slender figure of a beautiful young girl” emerging with a red banner atop the building that her side has occupied, aiming to earn glory by intentionally drawing the enemy's fire to herself:

She waved the battle banner as though brandishing her burning youth, trusting that the enemy would be burnt to ashes in the revolutionary flames, imagining that an ideal world would be born tomorrow from the ardor and zeal coursing through her blood... She was intoxicated by her brilliant, crimson dream until a bullet pierced her chest.<sup>86</sup>

As with the female Red Guards who killed her father, the narration here shows Ye Wenxue as utterly convinced of her own heroism; however, she is also repeatedly referred to by terms that emphasize her age and beauty, with the narration commenting on everything from the softness of her body as the bullet pierces it to the “single beautiful eye” that remains to stare at the sky after her corpse is used for target practice by the besiegers.<sup>87</sup> The juxtaposition of youthful beauty and idealism with violence creates a poignant scene that ends with the following coda: “And yet, compared to some others, she was fortunate. At least she died in the throes of passionately sacrificing herself for an ideal.”<sup>88</sup>

One one level, the function of this opening scene seems to be simply to add to the tragedy in the novel's depiction of the Cultural Revolution: the fanaticism of the era leads to the destruction not only of its ideological opponents and perceived enemies, but also of many of those who have embraced it. At the same time, the narrative shows that it is possible to regard the Red Guards with more than just condemnation, adding a shade of ambiguity to their depiction, which will be further explored in a later chapter. Perhaps most important features of the scene, however, are the parallels of Wenxue's death to that of her father: both are shown dying

Red Guard's description and recognizes her as Wenxue, who “had died two years ago in one of the wars between Red Guard factions” (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 39).

86 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 10.

87 The version of this passage in Liu, *Santi*, 59 is considerably shorter than the English translation and does not contain the description of the “target practice”; although I have not been able to confirm this, it would seem plausible that the additional text was excised from the Chinese version due to (self-)censorship and was restored for the English version.

88 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 11.

violently for the sake of their beliefs, yet simultaneously achieving a kind of dignity in death.

Curiously, the most significant difference between the two deaths seems to be in their effect on Ye Wenjie, and through her on the overall plot of the novel. While witnessing her father's demise can be considered the pivotal event that changes the course of her life, Ye Wenjie only learns of her sister's death after the fact, with the text making no note of her reaction to the news, after which Wenxue is not brought up again.<sup>89</sup> Wenxue's death therefore seems mostly irrelevant to the plot of *The Three-Body Problem*, yet its positioning at the very start of the novel and similarities to Ye Zhetai's demise indicate its thematic importance, which the foreshadowing in the opening scene's final lines highlights. I will therefore return to this point later, when I shall contrast the fates of both father and daughter in the novel with the way that Liu Cixin depicts the survivors of the Cultural Revolution.

In addition to the portrayal of the characters, this first chapter is also noteworthy in its description of the historical period itself—or, more precisely, the selectivity of its description. To set the scene, the chapter uses plenty of period detail, from a list of the weapons used in the opening battle and mentions of the real-life intellectuals who perished during the Cultural Revolution to images familiar from the accounts of survivors, such as the use of leather belts as implements of torture.<sup>90</sup> It is therefore notable that the historical background or the causes of the mass campaign are not referred to: there is no mention of the Gang of Four, purges of the CCP leadership, or the campaign's origins in officially-sanctioned cultural criticism.<sup>91</sup> In other parts of the novel, there are references to various stages of the

89 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 39: “Ever since her little sister had made a clean break with her reactionary academic authority family, Wenjie had heard no news about her. She had only learned recently that Wenxue had died two years ago in one of the wars between Red Guard factions.” In Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 36, it is also stated that Wenxue's reports on Ye Zhetai's supposed crimes ultimately led to his death, yet there is no mention of how this affected Ye Wenjie's feelings towards her sister.

90 Zhang Kangkang, for example, mentions seeing a female Red Guard whipping a prisoner with a belt in her memoirs, and the same image also appears in her novel *The Invisible Companion* (隱形伴侶 *Yinxing banlü*, 1986). See Xu, *The Evolutionary Feminism of Zhang Kangkang*, 133–134.

91 The Cultural Revolution officially began in late 1965 as a campaign criticizing “bourgeois tendencies” within China's artistic and literary circles, and was only expanded into a mass campaign in the spring of 1966. See Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 169–172.

Cultural Revolution, such as the “Return to Class, Continue the Revolution” (复课闹革命 *fuke nao geming*) phase,<sup>92</sup> but not to any sort of starting point for it.<sup>93</sup> The closest *The Three-Body Problem* comes to giving a full history of the Cultural Revolution is in a later chapter, where one of the younger Red Guards recalls that “out of the four of us, three had signed the big-character poster at the high school attached to Tsinghua” and that they “went through every single milestone in the history of the Red Guards from birth to death,” starting with the revolutionary tours (which only commenced in the autumn of 1966) and rallies at Tian'anmen Square.<sup>94</sup> In a narrative written in the first-person or third-person limited perspective, such an omission might be understood as reflecting the characters' ignorance of the bigger picture,<sup>95</sup> but the novel's use of an omniscient narrator and its frequent inclusion of historical exposition render the lack of these particular pieces of background information conspicuous.<sup>96</sup>

Whatever the reasons for this omission, the end result is that *The Three-Body Problem* does not explicitly delve into how the event known as the Cultural Revolution came to pass, only into its effects (on the individual, national, and even, as we'll see later, global level). The overall effect is that the Cultural Revolution appears in the text as somehow ahistorical, outside the realm of normal historical causality: we are told that the primary characteristic of the Cultural Revolution was

92 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 297; Liu, *Santi*, 224.

93 The English version does refer to “the start of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in early 1966” early on (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 9), but this is an addition by the translator; the Chinese speaks only of “early 1966” (1966 年初 *1966 nianchu*); see Liu, *Santi*, 58.

94 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 301.

95 Few of the Red Guards were in fact aware of the campaign's political background, and many survivors have described the situation as chaotic and confusing. See Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 177 and 179.

96 From an extratextual perspective, we may note two possible explanations for why this background information is not brought up in the novel. The first, and to my mind the most probable, is the continuing political sensitivity of the Cultural Revolution. The second is that the author simply thought that any Chinese reader would be familiar enough with the background of the events that mentioning it would be superfluous; according to Ken Liu, however, “Liu Cixin told me that he didn't think young readers in China (high school students, for instance) knew any more about the Cultural Revolution than American readers, and so those sections would read as strangely to them as they do to American readers. I think he might be exaggerating a little, but I do think it's true that young people are generally not terribly interested in the Cultural Revolution, viewing it as an ugly episode of China's past that has thankfully been left behind.” (Reddit, “Ken Liu AMA.”) Based on these statements, I do not think it is overinterpretation to highlight the omission of these historical facts in the text.

“madness,” but not where that madness originated. Should we take this as evidence that *The Three-Body Problem* is affected by the same superficiality of analysis that McDougall and Louie attribute to scar literature? Or is the lack of explanation an early indication that in *The Three-Body Problem*, the “madness” of the Cultural Revolution is symptomatic of something greater than just a particular historical situation? Later on, I shall argue that this is indeed the case, but before that we should examine what the novel tells us about two phenomena that are extremely relevant to understanding the wider historical context of the mass campaign—Mao Zedong’s ideological thought and the Cold War.

### 3.2 “A Better Life in This Vast Universe”: Maoist Utopianism and Cold War Realities

Although the immediate causes of the Cultural Revolution are not brought up in the text, *The Three-Body Problem* does in some ways address its ideological background, namely Maoist utopian thought. Mao himself is not mentioned by name in the Chinese version of the text, despite the omnipresence of his cult of personality during the mass campaign, and even during the struggle session he is only referenced once, when Ye’s two students try to stop the younger Red Guards from murdering their professor by reminding them that “the chairman instructed us to ‘rely on eloquence rather than violence’!”<sup>97</sup> However, even this indirect reference helps to underline an implicit distinction that the novel seems to make between Mao himself and his most fanatical followers.

To better understand *The Three-Body Problem*’s portrayal of Mao’s thought, we may look into a chapter titled “Red Coast III” (红岸之三 *Hong an zhi san*), which is presented as a series of declassified documents from the 1960s. The

97 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 19. The Chinese original is “最高指示：要文斗不要武斗!” (*zuigao zhishi: yao wen dou, bu yao wu dou*; Liu, *Santi*, 65), where “最高指示” is the standard phrase used for Mao’s directives during the Cultural Revolution. Mao is named in the novel’s opening scene in the English edition, but this is again an addition by the translator; compare Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 9 with Liu, *Santi*, 58.

documents are related to a secret project known by the code name Red Coast (红岸 *Hong an*), whose goal is to make first contact with alien civilizations, and several of them feature instructions signed by a leader whose name is presented as three blank blocks in the Chinese print version and as “XXX” in the English translation.

Considering the dating of the documents, this leader can only be interpreted as a veiled reference to Mao; indeed, according to Mingwei Song the leader’s name was in fact given as Mao Zedong in an early online version of the novel.<sup>98</sup> In one of the documents, the leader rejects the first draft of a message that is to be broadcast into space, filled with Maoist jargon and exhortations to fight for revolutionary justice, and decrees that “the Cultural Revolution leadership should no longer have any involvement with Red Coast” (文革领导组今后不要介入红岸 *wenge lingdao zu jinhou bu yao jieru hong an*).<sup>99</sup> The implication seems to be that the Cultural Revolution was not led by Mao personally, but rather by a separate group of subordinates who took adherence to his ideas to fanatical lengths—a view of the events that fits quite well into the CCP’s preferred interpretation of the Cultural Revolution as the result of a lapse in Mao’s judgment and the actions of the Gang of Four.

From this perspective, the final draft of the message and the leader’s comments on it become especially interesting. While the message’s contents are still clearly influenced by Marxist theory (as shown by such turns of phrase as “conflicts between the forces of production and the relations of production”),<sup>100</sup> it mostly focuses on striking a careful balance of celebrating humanity’s accomplishments (including scientific ones) and admitting the need for further development:

Human societies are working hard to resolve the difficulties and problems they face, striving to create a better future for Earth civilization. The country that sent this message is engaged in this effort. We are dedicated to building an ideal society, where the labor and value of every member of the human race are fully respected, where everyone’s material and spiritual needs are fully met, so that civilization on Earth may become more perfect. [...] We look forward to working together with you to build a better life in this vast

98 Song, “After 1989,” 10.

99 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 171; Liu, *Santi*, 125.

100 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 172.



universe.<sup>101</sup>

The leader's instructions concerning this final draft end with the following observation: “How wonderful it will be if the universe really contains other intelligences and other societies! Bystanders have the clearest view. Someone truly neutral will then be able to comment on whether we're the heroes or villains of history.”<sup>102</sup> This is a far cry from the unshakable self-confidence of the Red Guards depicted earlier, further clarifying that the leader is not himself a fanatic and is at least willing to entertain the possibility that he is wrong. Moreover, the final draft's emphasis on human progress and its vision of a society “where the labor and value of every member of the human race are fully respected” are quite clearly descended from the Enlightenment philosophers' dream of human beings taking control over their destiny and creating “a genuinely human social and political order.”

Based on the above, *The Three-Body Problem* seems to draw a distinction between two forms of Maoist utopianism, with the fanatical worldview of the Red Guards and “the Cultural Revolution leadership” clearly differentiated from Mao's supposedly quite rational original philosophy. This, again, is in line with the CCP's official stance: in its 1981 resolution, the party reaffirmed that Mao's theory would continue to act as its guide, despite the “mistake” that was the Cultural Revolution. While the CCP may have abandoned such utopian visions in practice, the reaffirmation of Mao's thought as its guiding principle means that the idea of reforming society into an eventual utopia is still a part of its ideological heritage.

However, it should be emphasized that in *The Three-Body Problem*, this reasonable-sounding rhetoric appears in the immediate context of the Cold War and the accompanying arms race between superpowers. The documents in this chapter also clearly show that the impetus for the Red Coast Project comes from the search for a technological advantage over the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, as the novel later reveals, the Red Coast Project is eventually placed under the management of the Second Artillery Corps of the People's Liberation Army, which also controls China's nuclear missiles.<sup>103</sup> In another chapter, as a part of a description

101 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 172.

102 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 173.

103 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 47.

of the state of the world during the 1970s, we see that in *The Three-Body Problem* this arms race belongs firmly into the same category of “madness” as the Cultural Revolution: “The insanity of the human race had reached its historical zenith. The Cold War was at its height. Nuclear missiles capable of destroying the Earth ten times over could be launched at a moment’s notice [...] In the face of madness, rationality was powerless.”<sup>104</sup> Therefore, despite the rationalist rhetoric used to justify it, the Red Coast Project is still fundamentally a part of an ultimately destructive endeavor that is quite contrary to the building of an ideal society.

It might be tempting to explain away the incongruity between noble rhetoric and hawkish motivations that is on display here as simple hypocrisy, and take it as a license to ignore the Enlightenment-derived ideals found in the Red Coast documents as empty grandstanding. In my view, however, such a dismissal would not do justice to the novel’s examination of the contradictions between utopian thought and practical reality, which is not confined to the Cold War period. In the following sections, I shall attempt to show that *The Three-Body Problem* does not treat the contradiction here as merely an instance of hypocrisy on the Mao-like leader’s part (or even on the part of all Cold War superpowers), but rather asks whether these kinds of utopian ideals are in fact incompatible with the laws of our “vast universe” itself.

### 3.2 “No One Repents”: The “New Era” and the Legacy of the Cultural Revolution

As discussed before, part of the dominant narrative of the Cultural Revolution has been that the following period of economic reforms and political openness represents a return to normalcy, “a new era” where the project of Chinese modernity could be resumed. In *The Three-Body Problem*, this assumption is the most thoroughly interrogated in a chapter titled “No One Repents” (无人忏悔 *Wuren chanhui*), which describes events between 1979 and the early 1980s. Here, we see

104 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 270.

the development of Chinese society after the Cultural Revolution from the viewpoint of Ye Wenjie, who by the start of the chapter has worked at Red Coast Base for several years. During this time, she has not only made contact with an alien civilization known as the Trisolarans and agreed to help them in their conquest of Earth, but also caused the deaths of the Red Coast Base's political commissar Lei Zhicheng and her own husband Yang Weining in order to prevent knowledge about her collusion from spreading.

The chapter opens with a group of children from a nearby village approaching Ye for help with their studies, letting her know that the National College Entrance Examination (高考 *gaokao*) has been re-introduced. Later on, as Ye leaves Red Coast Base, she feels how the atmosphere in China is changing:

The cold winter of the Cultural Revolution really was over, and everything was springing back to life. [...] Science and technology were the only keys to opening the door to the future, and people approached science with the faith and sincerity of elementary school students. [...] Was this the end of the madness? Were science and rationality really coming back? Ye asked herself these questions repeatedly.<sup>105</sup>

Despite these changes, Ye Wenjie finds herself unable to let go of the past. After finally returning to Beijing, she briefly re-unites with her mother, who in the meantime has recovered from her mental breakdown, re-married and become a prominent intellectual. However, they soon part ways again when Shao Lin tells her daughter that Ye Zhetai let his family down by clinging to his beliefs and that Wenjie should not “try to pursue old historical debts.”<sup>106</sup> Disregarding her mother's advice, Ye Wenjie decides to track down the female Red Guards who killed her father and, having managed to find three of them, invites them to a meeting at the exercise grounds of Tsinghua University; her goal, we are told, is not revenge but simply making the Red Guards repent for their actions, so that she can “see even a hint of the return of humanity.”<sup>107</sup>

The reunion is very deliberately contrasted with Ye Zhetai's struggle session:

105 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 297.

106 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 299.

107 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 299.

the three Red Guards wear their old uniforms, now faded and patched, and they stand in front of his daughter “in a row—just like they had stood against Ye Zhetai—trying to recapture their long-forgotten dignity.”<sup>108</sup> Unlike before, no charges are read and no punishments are meted out; instead, after Ye Wenjie tells the Red Guards about her desire for closure, there is the following exchange:

“Then you want to hear us repent?” the thick woman asked.

“Don't you think you should?”

“Then who will repent to us?” the one-armed woman asked.<sup>109</sup>

The Red Guards then recollect the hardships they had endured during and after the Cultural Revolution: losing an arm in battle, being sent down to “forgotten villages,” having to see friends and comrades die, and not having any way to continue their lives even after being allowed to return to the city. At several points, they refer to the difficulty of expressing their experiences in words—one woman speaks of coming across other Red Guards and having “nothing to say to each other” (相视无语 *xiangshi wuyu*), and another says that she “can't fucking talk about this anymore” (我他妈说不下去了 *wo tama shuo bu xia qu le*)<sup>110</sup> before breaking down in tears—and throughout their stories, Ye herself listens in silence. Having reached the end of their tale, one of the Red Guards finishes it off with the following: “It's a new age now. Who will remember us? Who will think of us, including you? Everyone will forget all this completely!” As they leave, Ye feels that “the small sliver of hope for society that had emerged in her soul had evaporated,” although it is left ambiguous whether this is due to the Red Guards' sad fates or their lack of repentance. Moreover, her doubts over her actions at Red Coast Base have also disappeared, giving her a new purpose in life: “Ye finally had her unshakable ideal: to bring superior civilization from elsewhere in the universe into the human world.”<sup>111</sup>

In this chapter, *The Three-Body Problem* significantly complicates the common picture of the post-Cultural Revolution period as a “new era” in Chinese

108 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 300.

109 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 300–301.

110 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 301–302; Liu, *Santi*, 227.

111 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 302.

history. Superficially, everything seems to have changed in society, as intellectuals are rehabilitated and an obsession with ideological purity is replaced with a faith in science; however, the scars inflicted during the “Madness Years” are still there, and show no sign of healing. Shao Lin, who has done well for herself and reveals no sign of the persecution she went through, is the most emblematic of the spirit of the times, yet her desire to leave the past behind makes it impossible for her to reconcile with her daughter. The Red Guards, on the other hand, are incapable of forgetting, since they bear the marks of the past on their very bodies. As living reminders of history, they have been exiled to it in the same way as they were exiled to the countryside, and unlike their dead comrades and enemies (such as Ye Wenxue, who “died in the throes of passionately sacrificing herself for an ideal”), they have lived to see that all their sacrifices were for nothing. The character that is the most conflicted over the changes in Chinese society is Ye Wenjie, who is given the chance to simply accept the ostensible return of rationality and science; instead, she chooses to confront the past in the hopes of finding closure, yet is ultimately unable to achieve her goal of witnessing a “return of humanity” (reminiscent of the “rejuvenation of humanistic consciousness” that scar literature called for).

In addition to its depiction of the “new era” as such, this chapter is also notable for its subversion of the accusatory discourse underlying scar literature. The characters here are simultaneously victims of violence and complicit in it: the Red Guards willingly committed atrocities during the Cultural Revolution, yet were themselves ground down by it; Shao Lin lost her husband and youngest daughter, yet also participated in Ye Zhetai’s persecution; and Ye Wenjie lost everything she had in the mass campaign, yet also killed Lei Zhicheng and Yang Weining and may have doomed countless people to death by siding with the Trisolarans.<sup>112</sup> As a result, Ye Wenjie’s attempt to use the same rational argumentation that Ye Zhetai had deployed to defend himself has no effect on the Red Guards: the accused party does not so much defend themselves against the charges as brush them aside and question the very possibility of obtaining justice for past grievances. Indeed, the Red Guards’ final claim that “everyone will forget all this completely” seems to even point the accusing finger towards those who did not even live through the period, as their

112 The complicity of all the characters mentioned and its significance are underlined by the chapter’s title, which indicates that there is more than one guilty party depicted here.

forgetting and silence will render them complicit after the fact. At the same time, this complicity may be inevitable, since it may be impossible to relate the full horror of the Cultural Revolution in words, a fundamental weakness of scar literature that David Der-wei Wang also brings attention to in his critique:

I do not deny the excruciating pain and sorrow underlying scar writings; quite the contrary, I am arguing that, precisely because the narrated facts are so horrifying, they expose the paucity of narrative forms available for transmitting historical atrocity as such. [...] A verbal re-enactment of Maoist purges, as in the majority of scar literature, will not redeem the deaths and resentments of millions of Chinese, nor properly represent the dark force of tyranny and the hidden power of a million unutterable questions.<sup>113</sup>

It is by depicting these sorts of ambiguous characters and situations that *The Three-Body Problem* in my opinion moves away from the clear-cut situations of scar literature and towards tackling what Yibing Huang calls “cultural bastardy.” Interestingly, the prime example of this do not seem to be the Red Guards, although their lives have clearly followed the plot of the “bildungsroman” visioned by Huang as they have gone from believing themselves successors of the revolution to being “lost in history”; nor is it Shao Lin, who does embody the desire to break with the past but who might be understood as having only been scarred (rather than “branded”) by the Cultural Revolution. Rather, the character that is the most clearly “contaminated” by the mass campaign seems to be Ye Wenjie, whose first attempt at finding closure mirrors the earlier struggle session and who then finds an “unshakable ideal” in her intention to remake the world, a goal that I will return to in the next section.<sup>114</sup>

In this reading, the earlier deaths of Ye Zhetai and Ye Wenxue also become a symbol of the death of two fundamentally optimistic worldviews, that is, confidence in science and rationality on one hand and faith in achieving utopia through political

113 Wang, introduction, xxv.

114 Ye Wenjie’s status as a “bastard” born out of the Cultural Revolution is reinforced by the fact that in the novel’s original chapter order, we only see her after the death of her father. Therefore, all references to her life before and after the mass campaign are filtered through our knowledge of its impact on her, so that throughout the text, she appears to us as a product of the Cultural Revolution.

struggle on the other. While both may still exist in some form, in *The Three-Body Problem*'s portrayal of the post-Cultural Revolution era they seem to have become compromised and to have lost their earlier ability to inspire. This is more obvious in the case of political utopianism, discredited even among the most fanatical of its adherents by the failure of the mass campaign, yet despite the seeming return to the pre-Cultural Revolution situation it would seem to hold for rationalism as well. One example of this is that although Ye Zhetai and Ye Wenjie are both equally unsuccessful in changing the minds of their opponents, Ye Zhetai can at least be said to have died as a moral victor, while Ye Wenjie is ultimately unable to rise above those who have wronged her. In the end it is also she, the staunchest believer in rationality among the survivors of the Cultural Revolution shown here, who decides that human reason is incapable of creating the superior civilization that she wishes for. Therefore, the text seems to imply that the "faith and sincerity" displayed towards science and rationality during the post-Cultural Revolution era might in fact be just as naive as the Red Guards' belief in their ability to bring about a Maoist utopia.

### 3.4 The New Fanatics: The ETO and Reforming Humankind

The fanaticism of the Red Guards is mirrored in *The Three-Body Problem*'s present-day storyline by the novel's main antagonists, the Earth-Trisolaris Movement (地球三体运动 *dìqiú-sāntǐ yùndòng*) or the Earth-Trisolaris Organization (地球三体组织 *dìqiú-sāntǐ zǔzhī*), abbreviated to ETO in the English translation. The ETO consists humans working on behalf of an alien civilization on the planet Trisolaris (三体 *Sāntǐ*), which is being threatened with destruction due to the planet's unpredictable orbit around a three-star system, and its goal is to prepare humankind for the Trisolarans' invasion of Earth. To this end, they employ a variety of tactics, including sabotage, assassination and subtle propaganda, most notably a virtual reality game called *Three Body* that is used to attract potential recruits fascinated by the aliens' culture.

Originally, the ETO's plan of action was based on the notion that since "human society can no longer rely on its own power to solve its problems," or to "restrain its madness," the Trisolarans must be allowed to come to Earth so that they can "forcefully watch over us and transform as, so as to create a brand-new, perfect human civilization."<sup>115</sup> However, by the time of the novel's present this plan has largely been abandoned and the movement has split into several factions with their own agendas, the most important of which are the Adventists (降临派 *jianglinpai*) and the Redemptionists (拯救派 *zhengjiupai*).<sup>116</sup> The Redemptionists, the newer of the two groups, are described as a religious organization who worship the Trisolarans and seek to serve them, either through giving them the means to continue living on their home planet (by solving the "three-body problem" of classical mechanics that gives the novel its English title) or through providing them a new home on Earth. The Adventists, the more fundamentalist original faction, have a less idealized view of the extraterrestrial civilization: their hope is that instead of saving humankind, the aliens will in fact destroy us, as the Adventists believe our species to be irredeemably evil. In addition to these two main groups, the novel names a third faction, called the Survivors (幸存派 *xingcunpai*), who plan to welcome our new alien overlords (due to arrive centuries in the future) in the hopes that this will insure the survival of the ETO members' descendants.<sup>117</sup>

While the historical steps leading to the formation of the Red Guards are not explored in *The Three-Body Problem*, the birth of the ETO is delineated in detail. Its commander-in-chief turns out to be none other than Ye Wenjie, who secretly made contact with the Trisolarans while working at Red Coast Base and revealed Earth's location to them so that they could conquer it. This decision, were told, was based on Ye's "rational consideration of humanity's evil side," including the "madness" of the Cultural Revolution and the Cold War and "the bloody history of humanity" in general, as well as humankind's destruction of nature (a theme that I will discuss in more detail in the next section).<sup>118</sup> Years later, she meets Mike Evans, a radical American environmentalist, and tells him about the Trisolarans; Evans goes on to become the ETO's founder and the head of its Adventist faction, with Ye herself

115 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 253.

116 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 318–319; Liu, *Santi*, 240.

117 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 321; Liu, *Santi*, 242.

118 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 269–270.



elected to the position of commander-in-chief or “spiritual leader” (精神领袖 *jingshen lingxiu*), and the movement starts to grow by recruiting others who have lost faith in human civilization.

There are several aspects of the ETO which hark back to the Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution. The most obvious ones, naturally, are their insistence on ideological purity, their factionalism and their willingness to resort to violence, even against their supposed comrades; all of these are demonstrated in the chapter “Rebels of Earth” (地球叛军, *Diqiu panjun*), where a group of ETO members hurl accusations of insufficient loyalty towards the organization at each other until one is executed (at Ye Wenjie’s behest) as a traitor. In a later chapter that tells the conclusion to this meeting, there is even a specific parallel to the siege at the start of the novel: surrounded by Chinese soldiers and told to surrender, the ETO members reveal that they have a small nuclear bomb and threaten to use it to kill all present unless Ye Wenjie is let go. Moreover, similar to what was implied with the unnamed leader’s reference to a “Cultural Revolution leadership,” Ye does not have control over the details of the ETO’s operations; instead, they seem to be mostly controlled by Mike Evans and the core group of the Adventists, the movement’s own “Gang of Four,” who have for example monopolized communications with the Trisolarans.

However, the ETO also differs from its Cultural Revolution counterpart in several key ways, such as the composition of its membership. While in the case of the Red Guards the younger, less-educated and less-experienced students were portrayed as the most fanatical, most members of the ETO are described as being highly educated and often well-positioned in society. (The Survivors form an exception, as they “tended to come from the lower social classes,” with most of them being “from the East, and especially from China.”<sup>119</sup>) According to the movement’s own view, these demographics are due to the fact that “the common people did not seem to have the comprehensive and deep understanding of the highly educated about the dark side of humanity. More importantly, because their thoughts were not as deeply influenced by modern science and philosophy, they still felt an overwhelming, instinctual identification with their own species. To betray the human

119 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 321.

race as a whole was unimaginable to them.”<sup>120</sup> This suggests that contrary to what may have been implied earlier in the novel (and in contrast to the valorization of intellectuals in “The Class Teacher” and other works of scar literature), intellectualism might in fact not deter fanaticism, but rather promote it.

There is also a clear difference between the ideology expressed both by the Red Guards and in the Red Coast Project documents on one hand and by the ETO on the other when it comes to their stance on the idea of human progress. As discussed earlier, the Mao stand-in’s belief in progress and vision of an “ideal society” are ultimately rooted in the Enlightenment belief that rationality can free us from oppressive institutions and create a genuinely human social order. During Ye Zhetai’s struggle session, the Red Guards express their own version of this idea by rejecting God and religion as “tools concocted by the ruling class to paralyze the spirit of the people.”<sup>121</sup> All factions of the ETO, however, are unified by their belief that humankind is inferior to the Trisolarans, either in terms of technological advancement or of moral standing, and that we are incapable of self-improvement; it is this belief that more than anything else that separates their movement from not only the Red Guards, but also from all other characters in the novel.

While the denial of humankind’s potential for advancement might seem like a simple rejection of the enlightenment faith in rationality, it is worth noting that this rejection is not in itself portrayed as irrational. As mentioned above, Ye Wenjie’s original goal in inviting the Trisolarans to Earth was to have them “restrain our madness,” that is, our irrational and violent impulses. Moreover, although Ye Wenjie’s conclusions about humankind’s deficiencies are informed by her own experiences, they do not seem reducible to a mere symptom of psychological trauma; Ye, we are told, “had the mental habits of a scientist, and she refused to forget. Rather, she looked with a rational gaze on the madness and hatred that had harmed her.”<sup>122</sup> Based on the text, she seems to have definitively erred only when assuming that the Trisolarans would be more moral than humans, as shown in this exchange with an unnamed interrogator after she has been taken prisoner by the soldiers:

INTERROGATOR: Do you understand Trisolaran civilization?

120 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 317.

121 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 19.

122 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 269.

YE: No. We received only very limited information. [...]

INTERROGATOR: Then why do you have such hope for it, thinking that it can reform and perfect human society?

YE: If they can cross the distance between the stars to come to our world, their science must have developed to a very advanced stage. A society with such advanced science must also have more advanced moral standards.

INTERROGATOR: Do you think this conclusion you drew is scientific?

YE:...

INTERROGATOR: Let me presume to guess: Your father was deeply influenced by your grandfather's belief that only science could save China. And you were deeply influenced by your father.

YE: (*sighing quietly*) I don't know.<sup>123</sup>

On the surface, the exchange merely points out that while Ye's conclusion about humankind's evils may have been based on logic and evidence, she made an error (with even worse consequences than those of Mao's "great mistake") when assuming that the Trisolarans would be any better.<sup>124</sup> This could be taken to mean that it was ultimately Ye Wenjie's irrational hope that led to the creation of the ETO and the perpetuation of the vicious cycle of fanaticism and violence. However, there is a bleaker conclusion to be drawn here: just as the possession of advanced science or mastery over the natural world (a definite example of enlightenment rationality) does not necessarily mean the possession of advanced moral standards, rationality does not necessarily lead to morality—and to trust that it does is in itself irrational.

123 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 345. Here, we might also note that Ye Wenjie's conclusion (in Chinese: 一个科学如此昌明的社会, 必然拥有更高的文明和道德水准 *yi ge kexue ruci changming de shehui, biran yongyou geng gao de wenming he daode shuizhun*; Liu, *Santi*, 260) brings to mind Song's description of early Chinese science fiction as being preoccupied with "a future that is advanced equally in science, morality, and political life."

124 It might be noted that for Liu Cixin, this is an assumption that we should avoid making in real life as well, as he states in his postscript to the novel: "[...] for the universe outside the solar system, we should be ever vigilant, and be ready to attribute the worst of intentions to any Others that might exist in space. For a fragile civilization like ours, this is without a doubt the most responsible path." (Liu, postscript, 395.)

To better understand Ye Wenjie's simultaneous role as a defender of rationality and the leader of a fanatical movement, we may return to her status as a "cultural bastard," which is now on full display here. Ironically, despite (and even because of) her vehement opposition to the violence and irrationality of the Cultural Revolution, she has only managed to become the leader of a new generation of violent fanatics. Moreover, not only is she unable to pursue her aims except through resorting to such unenlightened means, but her goal of "reforming human society" in the hopes of a better (or perhaps even "ideal") world reveals her debt to Maoist utopian thinking and its dream of "socialist new men." In the end, as the Trisolarans are revealed to be interested solely in conquering Earth and not in reforming our civilization, Ye Wenjie nevertheless has to face the same realization as the former Red Guards: that everything she has done to bring about a better world has ultimately been for nothing.

As can be seen from the above, *The Three-Body Problem's* depiction of the ETO and especially of Ye Wenjie as their leader significantly complicates its treatment of the themes of rationality and fanaticism introduced in the novel's first chapter. Instead of the simple juxtaposition of the violent, fanatical Red Guards and the rational, scientifically-minded Ye Zhetai, we now have much more ambiguous situation, one where rationality proves no safeguard against falling into fanaticism but instead becomes entangled with its supposed opposite. In the next two sections, I shall argue that this is not merely an isolated instance within the novel, but rather a part of a wider questioning of rationality's ability to save humankind from our destructive impulses.

### **3.5 Deforestation, "Madness," and the Tyranny of Reason: *The Three-Body Problem* and *The King of Trees***

Apart from the Cultural Revolution and the Cold War, *The Three-Body Problem* highlights the destruction of nature as a specific example of humankind's worst impulses and as a reason for losing faith in humanity. This theme is introduced

as early as in the second of the Cultural Revolution chapters, “Silent Spring” (寂静的春天 *Jijing de chuntian*). The chapter takes place two years after the events of “The Madness Years” in the Greater Khingan Mountains, where Ye Wenjie and other “educated youths” are working to clear an ancient forest. Unable to participate in revolutionary tours and with their “romantic wish” of fighting the Soviets still unrealized, the youths turn their energy to cutting down trees, leaving behind such destruction that Ye can “only describe the deforestation that she witnessed” as “madness” (疯狂 *fengkuang*), the same word that was used to sum up the entire Cultural Revolution in the title of the previous chapter.<sup>125</sup> The comparison between the mass campaign and the destruction of nature is made explicit after Bai Mulin, a reporter for the production corps' newspaper who is also concerned about deforestation, gives Ye a copy of the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, with the book's description of the environmental damage caused by pesticides leading her to a startling revelation:

The use of pesticides had seemed to Ye just a normal, proper—or, at least, neutral—act, but Carson's book allowed Ye to see that, from Nature's perspective, their use was indistinguishable from the Cultural Revolution, and equally destructive to our world. If this was so, then how many other acts of humankind that seemed normal or even righteous were, in reality, evil? [...] *It was impossible to expect a moral awakening from humankind itself, just like it was impossible to expect humans to lift off the earth by pulling up on their own hair. To achieve moral awakening required a force outside the human race.*<sup>126</sup>

Deforestation is brought up again in a later chapter, titled “Evans,” which takes place after the Cultural Revolution and depicts two meetings between Ye Wenjie and Mike Evans, the future founder of the ETO. They first encounter each other when Ye, as part of a task force scouting locations for a new radio astronomy observatory, travels to an area in Northwest China, where Evans is planting trees in order to provide a habitat for an endangered type of swallow. At first angry at the task force members'

125 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 23-24; Liu, *Santi*, 67-68.

126 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 27-28; italics in the original.

assumption that his stated desire to “save lives” means saving people, whom he considers to be “already living much better than they deserve,” he then calms down and opens up about his life story. The son of an oil billionaire, Evans became an environmentalist after witnessing an oil spill caused by his father’s company, and later came to invent “Pan-Species Communism” (物种共产主义 *wuzhong gongchanzhuyi*), an ideology (“or maybe you can call it a faith,” he adds) which holds that “all species on Earth are created equal.”<sup>127</sup>

Three years later, Ye Wenjie suddenly hears again from Evans and returns to the Northwest to find that the impoverished villagers are cutting down the forest he had planted, with the scene of its destruction striking her as “almost-familiar.” Though Evans has by now inherited his father’s assets and could pay the villagers to stop the logging, he doesn’t believe that it matters anymore: “Everything you see before you is the result of poverty. But how are things any better in the wealthy countries? [...] The entire human race is the same. As long as civilization continues to develop, the swallows I want to save and all other swallows will go extinct. It’s just a matter of time.”<sup>128</sup> This persuades Ye Wenjie to tell him about the Trisolarans and her belief that only they can help humanity to improve, which leads Evans to dedicate his financial resources to re-establishing contact with the Trisolarans and creating the ETO.

As can be seen from the above, environmental destruction clearly plays a central narrative and thematic role in *The Three-Body Problem*, similar to the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, as soon the theme of environmental destruction is introduced it is presented as being linked to the mass campaign, both through the description of how the educated youths sublimate their revolutionary fervor into transforming the natural landscape and the telling use of the word “madness” to describe their actions. If this early scene was all the novel had to say about the subject, it would be easy to conclude that this was just an extension of its condemnation of the Cultural Revolution, and that the destruction wreaked here should be considered merely an example of the disastrous application of Mao’s tenet that “man must conquer nature” (人定胜天 *ren ding sheng tian*).

However, the picture is soon complicated by the inclusion of Carson’s book

127 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 305–307.

128 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 309–311.

and, through it, environmental destruction that is wholly unrelated to the Cultural Revolution, yet in Ye Wenjie's view also indistinguishable from it. This is reinforced later in the novel by the destruction of the forest that Evans planted, which strikes Ye as "almost-familiar" despite happening years after the Cultural Revolution and being motivated purely by economical gain, and the environmentalist's observation that not even wealthy countries have been able to stop the destruction of the environment. Clearly, then, within the novel environmental destruction is not caused by just ideological fanaticism (unlike the violence of the Cultural Revolution), but rather it would seem to be due to some deeper root cause, one that Ye Wenjie and Mike Evans see as integral to human civilization and its relationship with nature.

To understand what precisely might be behind the destruction of nature highlighted here, it may be useful to compare the approach taken by *The Three-Body Problem* to another work that deals with deforestation in the Cultural Revolution era, the novella *The King of Trees* (树王 *Shu wang*, originally published in 1985) by the root-seeking writer Ah Cheng. In the novella, a conflict arises between the inhabitants of a mountain village and a group of "educated youth" sent to clear the forests around it when Li Li, the informal leader of the youths, decides that they must cut down an ancient tree which is believed to have become a spirit. The main opponent of his plan is a local soldier turned farmer called Xiao Geda, or "Knotty" in McDougall's English translation, who seems to have an innate, perhaps even supernatural connection to the tree; soon after it is eventually cut down, Knotty falls ill and dies, having chosen to be buried next to where the tree once stood.<sup>129</sup>

As with the "Silent Spring" chapter of *The Three-Body Problem*, it is possible to see Li Li's insistence on cutting down the ancient tree as a manifestation of a fanatical belief in Maoist ideology. This seems to be the interpretation of McDougall and Louie, who sum up the novella as showing "a preference for village superstition over political dogmatism."<sup>130</sup> On the surface level, this reading is supported by the fact that Li Li's most treasured possession is a trunk full of books, "all political works,"<sup>131</sup> and by his tendency to speak in slogans and political jargon. Less

129 Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (New York: New Directions), 1–56.

130 McDougall and Louie, 401.

131 Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees*, 5–6.

obviously, Li Li justifies his plan by saying that the tree “hides the sun so that other things can’t grow,” which McDougall sees as a veiled reference to Mao Zedong, portrayed as the red sun in Cultural Revolution iconography.<sup>132</sup> In light of *The Three-Body Problem*’s references to the Cultural Revolution as “madness,” it’s also worth noting that one of the educated youths refers to Li Li as having “gone crazy” in his quest against superstition, a similar equation of political fanaticism and insanity.<sup>133</sup> It seems therefore quite uncontroversial to claim, as McDougall does, that *The King of Trees* rejects “the official political and moral values of the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>134</sup>

However, it would be too simplistic to reduce the values rejected by *The King of Trees* to dogmatism and fanaticism: as Li Tuo argues, Li Li can also be interpreted first and foremost as a representative of reason.<sup>135</sup> This is indeed how he sees himself, as witnessed by his frequent derisive references to “superstition” and his insistence that the tree should be cut down because “it’s location is not scientific.”<sup>136</sup> When Li Li asserts to Knotty that “man will triumph over Heaven” and that man, not gods, created fields and forged iron,<sup>137</sup> he is therefore not just repeating Maoist doctrine, but also engaging in an attempt to stamp out superstition and ignorance by using the most advanced scientific knowledge available to him, i.e., Friedrich Engels’ theory of how “labor created humanity.”<sup>138</sup> Moreover, as the novella’s narrator explains to Knotty, the educated youth have been sent to the village to (among other goals) “cut down useless trees and replace them with useful ones”;<sup>139</sup> this distinction into useless and useful not only harks back ironically to a parable in the *Zhuangzi* (a Daoist reference typical of Ah Cheng’s works), but also reflects the enlightenment “drive to master and control nature” identified by Adorno and Horkheimer, illustrating the different attitudes towards nature held by the modern, Western-derived and the traditional Chinese worldviews. Li Tuo, who sees Li Li’s crate of books as representing not political dogma, but “knowledge,”

132 Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees*, 19, and McDougall, afterword, 192–193.

133 Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees*, 41.

134 McDougall, afterword, 192.

135 Li, “Resistance to Modernity,” 142–143.

136 Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees*, 43.

137 Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees*, 46.

138 Engels’ theory was the core of the paleoanthropological knowledge disseminated during the Cultural Revolution period, and was meant to replace Christian and traditional Chinese ideas about deities creating human beings (Schmalzer, “Labor Created Humanity,” 186).

139 Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees*, 11.



argues accordingly that the educated youth wins his debate with Knotty because unlike the soldier-farmer, he has at his disposal a “grand theory [...] backed up by the unparalleled authority of the knowledge and (instrumental) reason established by the modernization process over the past few hundred years. Thus the implication of Xiao Geda's death for the sake of the trees appears to be not the shattering of the unity of humankind and nature, but the tyranny of reason.”<sup>140</sup> In opposition to a reading that would see Li Li purely as a dogmatist, Li Tuo makes a point similar to that illustrated by the continuation of deforestation in the 1980s in *The Three-Body Problem*:

Perhaps some would object that this kind of tyranny is not purely due to reason; the destruction of the mountain wilderness in *The King of Trees* is political: the Cultural Revolution was an era without reason, so reason and knowledge cannot be held responsible for the absurdities of the time. The answer to this objection involves many issues; in order not to veer far from the main topic, I will just point out one thing: the Cultural Revolution ended years ago, but the widespread destruction of nature in the name of science and reason is still going on today.<sup>141</sup>

In light of Li Tuo's analysis of *The King of Trees*, which, if not directly inspired by Adorno and Horkheimer, clearly draws from similar avenues of criticism, it seems reasonable to ask whether *The Three-Body Problem* could be understood through a similar reading. Clearly, the loggers depicted in the novel seem to ultimately view the trees they are cutting down in instrumental terms, disregarding any value that they might have except as a resource. As in Adorno and Horkheimer's theory, this thinking would also seem to be rooted in the drive to master nature and the attendant necessity of categorizing it as the object of knowledge, illustrated in the novel by how the production corps' saws turn immeasurably old trees into stumps from which their age can be determined by simply counting their annual rings. It is the advancing influence of this view of nature, rather than that of any political campaign or temporary economical condition, that might be a sufficient reason for Ye and Evans

140 Li, “Resistance to Modernity,” 142.

141 Li, “Resistance to Modernity,” 142.

to conclude that humankind's advancement will inevitably lead us into conflict with the needs of the other species living on Earth.

However, there are also telling differences between *The Three-Body Problem* and *The King of Trees*. Firstly, following on from the seeming valorization of intellectuals present in its early chapters, *The Three-Body Problem* switches around the roles of intellectuals and common people compared to *The King of Trees*. In the Cultural Revolution chapter, only the astrophysicist Ye Wenjie and the reporter Bai Mulin are troubled by deforestation; the presumably less-educated workers go along with it as par for the course, with one responding to Bai's concern over the trees by muttering that "intellectuals always make a fuss over nothing."<sup>142</sup> Later on, the cutting down of the trees is carried out by the practical-minded locals, who are motivated by economic concerns, and opposed by the idealistic Evans, who in his discussion with Ye Wenjie displays an understanding of everything from biology to the history of ideas. Moreover, unlike in Ah Cheng's work, in *The Three-Body Problem* none of the characters (much less the narration) seriously suggest that the trees could be in any way supernatural. Even though Ye Wenjie does humanize the trees by thinking of them as fallen giants and sometimes even as the corpse of her father, these are clearly just the imaginations of a traumatized mind. In the end, the trees are just trees, things which can be understood by any rational human mind in accordance with the commensurability of scientific knowledge and nature assumed by the enlightenment tradition. Finally, while Ah Cheng draws heavily from traditional Chinese thought in his critique of the destruction of nature, such possibilities are not explored in *The Three-Body Problem*. Ironically, in Liu Cixin's work it is only the American Evans who brings up Chinese or Asian philosophy (more specifically, Buddhism, which he considers the first historical manifestation of his "Pan-Species Communism"), and even he is forced to admit that it has not made modern China any different from the West in their relationship to the natural environment.

These differences to *The King of Trees* all seem to serve to eliminate from the novel any possibility of an alternative to the modern, enlightenment-derived view of nature. Unlike Ah Cheng or other root-seeking writers, who sought answers to the challenges of modernity by investigating China's traditional culture, *The Three-Body*

142 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 25.

*Problem* clearly does not present premodern worldviews as able to stand up to dominance of rationality. If in *The King of Trees* the question is, in Li Tuo's words, "resistance to modernity," here modernity (and the instrumental rationality contained within it) seems to have quite decisively won. Rational thinkers such as Ye Wenjie and Mike Evans are presented as self-aware enough to realize the cost of such a victory, but being trapped within rationality, they cannot conceive of any alternative to it.<sup>143</sup> Although they conclude that their only option is to place their trust in a higher power (that is, the Trisolarans), even this is ultimately proven to be a false hope, suggesting that there truly is no escape from "the tyranny of reason."

### 3.6 Rationalizing Violence: The Battle Command Centers, Tian'anmen, and "Reversion to Barbarism"

In *The Three-Body Problem*, the ostensibly heroic side in the battle over the future of humankind consists of the Battle Command Centers (作战中心 *zuozhan zhongxin*), a world-wide network secretly organized to investigate a possible

143 It might be asked whether Evans is truly supposed be viewed as a rational character, and whether his Pan-Species Communism is meant to be seen as an appealing worldview, and not as another type of fanatical ideology. On one hand, by his own admission his philosophy might be more accurately described as a "faith," which would seem to indicate that it cannot be justified purely through rational argumentation; moreover, the ETO's nihilist Adventist faction, which seeks humanity's complete destruction, is not only founded by Evans but is also noted to mainly consist of members who believe in Pan-Species Communism (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 318). On the other hand, both Ye Wenjie and her colleagues express their admiration of Evans' dedication to his cause after their first meeting, and Ye's only concern with his original ideas seems to be their impracticality, which he addresses by bringing up the possibilities created by the development of technology. Tellingly, Evans considers Pan-Species Communism to be "a natural continuation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 307), placing it in an ethical tradition also born out of Enlightenment philosophy, and in certain respects making it analogous to the rationalist utopianism displayed in the plans for the Red Coast Project. Later on, the Adventists are also described as being mostly "realists" who have no illusions about the Trisolarans being morally superior to humanity (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 318), in contrast to the religiously-minded Redemptionists. In sum, even if Evans and his followers have been driven to nihilism, their worldview is founded at least to some extent on rational considerations and not just on a fanatical rejection of enlightenment values, making it similar to Ye Wenjie's loss of faith in humankind.

conspiracy to cause the deaths of elite scientists. As the plot of the novel progresses, the Centers eventually uncover the ETO's role as the force behind the conspiracy, leading to an operation where they manage to neutralize the movement and to discover the Trisolarans' grand plan for conquering Earth. In particular, the *The Three-Body Problem* focuses on the Battle Command Center in Beijing, which recruits nanomaterials researcher Wang Miao into its investigation early on in the novel.

Before examining the Battle Command Centers, however, it is useful to look briefly at how the novel depicts the Red Coast Base, as both organizations are based on cooperation between representatives of the security apparatus and the military on the one hand and of the scientific community on the other. As discussed before, although the Red Coast Project's search for extraterrestrial intelligence is justified with utopian rhetoric, it is ultimately a part of a Cold War effort to gain a strategic advantage over the two superpowers competing for influence across the globe. As such, the political and national security considerations surrounding the project repeatedly hamper scientific work at the base: Ye Wenjie, despite being an indispensable part of the project's operations, is only gradually told of the its true purpose, and even the use of terms like "sunspots" is forbidden in research reports (since they might be interpreted as critical of Mao, "the red sun").<sup>144</sup> Tellingly, the project's main goal of making contact with an extraterrestrial civilization is only achieved when Ye Wenjie goes behind her superiors' backs and conducts an unsanctioned experiment with the base's broadcasting equipment. As such, the view given here of scientific work during the Cultural Revolution fits in with the widespread narrative of the mass campaign as "a period in which political campaigns and censorship made scientific achievement virtually impossible."<sup>145</sup>

The Cold War mentality of the Red Coast Base stands in stark contrast to the dynamism of the Battle Command Center in Beijing, and presumably therefore its counterparts across the globe, of which there are noted to be more than twenty.<sup>146</sup> Unlike the Red Coast Project, the Battle Command Centers are part of a multinational and intergovernmental effort, and the Beijing Center's meetings are

144 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 264; Liu, *Santi*, 196. As mentioned before, the Chinese text does not actually mention Mao by name, and neither is the rationale for avoiding the word "sunspots" explained; the English translation explicates the reference.

145 Schmalzer, "Labor Created Humanity," 186.

146 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 136.

attended not only by Chinese military officers and scientists, but also by representatives from at least the Chinese police, NATO, the CIA,<sup>147</sup> the Russian and Japanese armed forces,<sup>148</sup> and even the United Nations.<sup>149</sup> Perhaps most tellingly, despite the attendees' disparate organizational backgrounds and nationalities they habitually address each other as "comrades," indicating a high level of solidarity among them.<sup>150</sup>

The Battle Command Center's dynamism is perhaps best exemplified by the character of detective Shi Qiang, nicknamed "Da Shi" by his fellow officers, and the evolution of his role within the organization. In the Beijing Center's first depicted meeting, he asks for "information parity" between the representatives of the police and the military, which he has done at least once before. The general presiding over the meeting declines his request and, bringing up Da Shi's dishonesty and poor record as a police officer, makes it clear that the latter is only allowed to attend because his special expertise is considered useful and because "in a time of war, we can't afford to be too scrupulous."<sup>151</sup> However, his request for information parity is granted later on, after the true nature of the threat facing humankind has been revealed and the Battle Command Center is looking for a way to capture a set of computers containing information about the Trisolarans from the ETO. With his "out-of-the-box" thinking, Da Shi comes up with a plan that utilizes "Flying Blade" (飞刃 *fei ren*) nanomaterials developed by Wang Miao to effectively achieve this objective, earning the admiration of his colleagues.

From the above, it can be seen that the operations of the Beijing Battle Command Center display several key characteristics of rationality, especially in comparison to the Red Coast Base and the ETO. Unlike the Red Coast Base, the participants are able to engage in an open exchange of ideas and the consideration of

147 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 54.

148 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 333.

149 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 339.

150 It might be noted here that the differences between the operations and preoccupations of the Red Coast Base and the Battle Command Center also seem to reflect the rise of terrorism as an international security concern in the early 2000s. To point out just a few parallels, the Battle Command Center's utilization of both military and police resources calls to mind modern counter-terrorism work, while the ETO's quasi-religious ideology and recruitment of those alienated from society brings to mind popular images of jihadist terrorist groups.

151 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 56.

different viewpoints, which allows them to change their institutional practices to make them more efficient. This is ultimately made possible by their willingness to set aside their differences in order to work towards their common goal, which also sets them apart from the rival factions of the ETO. In addition, their acceptance of the corrupt yet useful Da Shi into their organization would seem to fit within the “the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success” mentioned by Calinescu as components of the “bourgeois idea of modernity.” Therefore, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that the Battle Command Center’s eventual victory over the ETO, achieved through Da Shi’s plan, can be seen as a victory of rationality over fanaticism.

However, it is worth examining the Battle Command Center’s moment of triumph in more detail, as it would seem to reveal another facet of the *The Three-Body Problem*’s ambiguous stance on rationality. As mentioned, the Battle Command Center is faced with the problem of obtaining information about the Trisolaran threat from the ETO, which is presumed to be vital to humankind’s survival. This information is stored on computers held on the ship *Judgment Day*, and due to the risk that the ETO members will erase the information if they are attacked, the only way to secure it is to capture the ship as quickly as possible. The eventual plan, named “Operation Guzheng” (古筝行动 *guzheng xingdong*) after the Chinese musical instrument, involves setting a trap made out of “Flying Blade” nanomaterials for the ship before it goes through the Panama Canal: the strings of nanomaterials, extremely sharp yet too thin to be detected, will slice the ship into pieces as it goes through them, allowing for the computers to be recovered and reassembled from the wreckage. This will mean sacrificing the lives of the ETO members and the ship’s crew, the latter of whom are assumed to be unaware of its real purpose, but this is ultimately considered an acceptable price to pay for the operation’s success.

The ambiguity in the novel’s depiction of Operation Guzheng can be seen from the way that Wang Miao reacts to its implementation, during which he observes the events from a distance. Unlike the stand-offs between the rival Red Guard factions at the start of the novel and the soldiers and the ETO members later on, the operation proceeds in an extremely orderly fashion, with negligible risk of casualties on the attacking side. Moreover, here violence against human beings is inflicted in a deeply impersonal manner, with none of the displays of courage or grandstanding seen earlier. Yet even before the ship’s destruction, described in awe-inspiring and

disquieting detail, Wang Miao is beset by physical nausea and conflicting emotions: at one moment he calls Da Shi a “bastard” and a “demon” for having come up with this plan, the next he laments the fact that the detective is not by his side. The sight of a man being cut into half by the strings almost makes Wang Miao break down, yet he does nothing and eventually picks up a pair of binoculars with “trembling hands” to observe the wreckage, seeing “a red spot” which might or might not be blood.<sup>152</sup> Such a reaction allows for multiple interpretations: guilt over his role in the operation, an attempt to deflect that feeling of guilt by blaming Da Shi, or perhaps just an irrational refusal to accept the destruction of the ship as necessary. Nevertheless, all underline the fact that the attack on *Judgment Day* is ultimately a horrifying act of violence, despite or maybe even because of the impersonal way that this violence is inflicted.

Perhaps even more than because of its violence, Operation Guzheng is disturbing because the *The Three-Body Problem* does not seem to present any alternative to it. Out of all the plans considered by the more than twenty Battle Command Centers over the world, it was Da Shi’s suggestion that was finally implemented, implying that it was the most reliable way to capture the computers. Though some of the attendees at the strategy meeting seem to have misgivings about the plan, none of them are shown to actively oppose it; even Wang Miao is powerless to prevent the (mis-?)use of his invention and goes along with the operation without even the kind of symbolic defiance displayed by Ye Zhetai towards his tormentors. In context, it is not hard to see why this would be so: any humanistic argument about the value of life would inevitably run against accusations of sentimentality and unwillingness to consider the mathematics of the situation, where the survival of humankind is pitted against the lives of a handful of people.<sup>153</sup> Yet if those present at

152 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 342–344.

153 Interestingly, some of these accusations might conceivably even come from the novel’s author, as according to Mingwei Song, Liu Cixin is “obviously not a humanist” and has in fact expressed an “absolute preference for survival over civilisation.” (Song, “After 1989,” 11 and 10; the latter citation concerns a debate where Liu argued for the acceptance of cannibalism in situations where it would be necessary for survival.) My own reading of Liu Cixin, being based only on the first part of the *Three-Body* trilogy, is by necessity more tentative than Song’s and therefore I cannot entirely discount his interpretation; nevertheless, I hope to show here that while Liu may not be a humanist himself, he is able to subtly and powerfully depict the dilemmas facing humanist characters in “the worst of all possible universes.”

the Battle Command Center accept the use of violence here as a case of the end justifying the means, are they so different from the fanatics of the ETO or the Red Guards, who after all justify their actions with the promise of a future utopia?

To examine the problematic of Operation Guzheng in the context of Chinese history, it might be appropriate to bring up one of the events that have most marked the post-Cultural Revolution era in China: the violent suppression of the protests at Tian'anmen Square in 1989. First, it should be made clear that the incident is not directly referred to in *The Three-Body Problem*, as the novel's action detaches itself from Chinese history and moves to a global stage with the formation of the Earth-Trisolaris Movement in the late 1980s. The lack of mention is not surprising due to the political sensitivity of the events, which prevents their open discussion in literature; as David Der-wei Wang has eloquently noted, "writers on the mainland have yet to lay bare the scars received during the Tian'anmen Incident of 1989, scars that cannot be treated since officially there are no wounds."<sup>154</sup> At the same time, the seeming absence of the incident in the novel is somewhat conspicuous in light of the novel's examination of the dangers inherent in utopian ideals, as it was the suppression of the democracy movement that marked "the collapse of idealism and optimism as well as a pervasive disillusionment with communism—or, in general, a political utopianism instituted by the state" in China.<sup>155</sup> It is this historical background that in my view justifies discussion of the Tian'anmen Incident here.<sup>156</sup>

As the single most prominent example of political violence in post-Mao Chinese history, the Tian'anmen Incident raises the question of whether the end of the Cultural Revolution truly lead to a "new era" and (in *The Three-Body Problem's*

154 Wang, introduction, xxv.

155 Song, "After 1989", 8.

156 The events at Tian'anmen do have roundabout (and possibly coincidental) parallels to the plotline of Liu's first novel, the aforementioned *China 2185*, which he began to write in February 1989. Although the novel does not directly refer to the student movement, its first scene is set in Tian'anmen Square and its main plot deals with "a cybernetic popular uprising that paralyses the authorities in the real world" that is eventually suppressed. (Song, "After 1989", 8.) In addition, Liu has stated that he originally conceived of his first published science fiction novel *The Era of the Supernova* (超新星纪元 *Chaoxinxing Jiyuan*, 2003) after waking up from a nightmare in Beijing on the night of June 3, 1989 (Song, "Representations of the Invisible," 549), which would have been the same day that soldiers of the People's Liberation Army took control of Tian'anmen Square (Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 327).



terms) to the return of “rationality” in Chinese society. From an outside perspective, it is easy to conclude that the two periods are united by the fundamental authoritarianism of the Chinese government, and that this was the ultimate cause of political violence in both periods. Paltemaa and Vuori, for example, see the change from Mao’s rule to the post-Mao period in terms of Václav Havel’s distinction between totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism: in a post-totalitarian society, the ruling party has abandoned the goal of remolding society in accordance with its official ideology, yet it still holds on to power for power’s sake.<sup>157</sup> According to the CCP itself, however, the motives for suppressing the protests were completely different from those behind Mao’s mass campaign (which, as mentioned, it sees primarily as a purge of the Party leadership). In a public statement after the events, China’s government claimed that its actions had been absolutely necessary in order to put down a counter-revolutionary revolt that was planning to kill all members of the CCP; while it had displayed great self-control at first, the “counter-revolutionaries” had taken advantage of its leniency and the government had to resort to the use of force so as to prevent the loss of millions of human lives.<sup>158</sup>

While the veracity of the CCP’s interpretation of the events is highly doubtful, in my opinion it is worth considering here because of its similarities to how *The Three-Body Problem* portrays Operation Guzheng: both narratives involve supposedly rationally-acting authorities using (what they claim to be) the minimum amount of deadly force necessary to stop a group of fanatics, sacrificing a few lives in order to save many times more. In this interpretation, Wang Miao seems to be in the same position as those conflicted Chinese within the state apparatus itself who were faced with both the government’s (again, supposedly indisputable) arguments for the suppression of the protests and with the suppression’s horrifying reality. The novel’s displacement of this situation away from China and onto the global stage (with two multinational organizations facing against each other) can be seen both as a necessity for treating something so politically sensitive and as an attempt to discuss the problem of violence not just in the context of the CCP’s authoritarian rule, but of the increasing rationalization of the modern world.

157 Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 15.

158 Paltemaa and Vuori, *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*, 328.

Based on the above, it seems justified to ask whether Operation Guzheng is an example of the kind “reversion to barbarism” that could be explained through Adorno and Horkheimer’s criticism of enlightenment. As mentioned, their theory sees the drive to dominate nature ultimately leading to “a form of reasoning and a general world-view” characterized by “a systematic indifference to human beings and their sufferings.” I’ve already noted how the Battle Command Center decides to dismiss the deaths caused by the operation, but this attitude is on display even earlier: during the hostage situation where Ye Wenjie is ultimately taken prisoner, Da Shi threatens the ETO members by claiming that “normal police procedures and laws don’t apply to you. Even the human laws of warfare no longer apply to you. Since you’ve decided to treat the entire human race as your enemy, there’s no longer anything we wouldn’t do to you.”<sup>159</sup> Leaving aside the ethical problems inherent in the kind of “eye-for-an-eye” justice invoked here, this declaration (analogous to the Chinese state’s declaration that the Tian’anmen protesters were “counter-revolutionaries”) seems noteworthy as a precursor to the Battle Command Center’s later decisions, as both are founded upon the dehumanization of those targeted by their actions. In Da Shi’s opinion, the ETO members are enemies that must be stopped, not human beings with inalienable rights; in the Battle Command Center’s decision-making process, the people aboard *Judgment Day* are not seen as individuals, but as interchangeable units that are compared to a larger group of units which comprises the rest of humankind. In both cases, human beings become “mere objects of the form of reason we have created,” which allows for the same form of reason to rationalize and justify acts that in themselves are horrifying examples of inhumanity. The most important question left open here, then, is not whether the violence committed in this or any other particular case is rational, but whether it is possible to oppose rationally justified violence without resorting to modes of thought that are in themselves irrational.

159 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 279.

### 3.7 Miracles and Bugs: Knowledge as Power and Its Limitations

As mentioned, the enlightenment tradition holds that human knowledge is commensurable with natural reality and that nothing about this reality is in principle unknowable. According to this view, we do not have to take statements about the world on faith, since we are able to gain accurate knowledge about the world through observation and the use of reason, with said knowledge forming the basis for our modern scientific worldview. This, in turn, allows us to gain control over the natural world and our own destiny, an idea summed up by the slogan “knowledge is power.”

The validity and ultimate worth of a scientific worldview, and its differences from a faith-based one, are a running thread throughout *The Three-Body Problem*. As we’ve seen, the distinction between faith and science is brought up during Ye Zhetai’s struggle session when he explains that there is no scientific evidence proving God’s existence or non-existence, and when Ye Wenjie is questioned over her belief in the Trisolarans’ moral superiority over humankind. At several other points in the novel, however, characters also explicitly equate these two ways of viewing the world. One such instance comes when Shao Lin’s new husband (speaking on behalf of his wife) claims that by refusing to renounce the scientific theories which he had taught, Ye Zhetai “clung to his own faith in a manner that was not healthy and walked all the way down a blind alley.”<sup>160</sup> Another comparison is made by theoretical physicist Ding Yi, whose girlfriend (and Ye Wenjie’s daughter) Yang Dong is one of a group of scientists who have committed suicide, apparently due to having come to the conclusion that “physics has never existed.”<sup>161</sup> This realization seems to have been sparked by experiments done with high-energy particle accelerators which show that “the laws of physics are not invariant across time and space”; this, according to Ding Yi, was enough to push Yang Dong to end her life, since “to accomplish something in theoretical physics requires one to have almost religious faith. It’s easy to be led to the abyss.”<sup>162</sup>

We are offered a more detailed picture of what actually happened to the

160 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 299.

161 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 60–61.

162 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 71.

scientists through the perspective of Wang Miao, who early on in the novel is tasked by the Beijing Battle Command Center to investigate a possible connection between the suicides and an organization called the Frontiers of Science. Soon, he finds himself involved in another mystery, as the pictures he takes with his mechanical camera start to include a number counting down from 1200 hours (around 50 days), which soon appears in his field of vision as well. Afraid of what the numbers might mean, Wang Miao contacts Shen Yufei, a member of the Frontiers of Science, who tells him that to stop the countdown he has to halt his research into nanomaterials. In order to prove that the countdown is more than just some complicated trick, Shen also instructs Wang Miao to observe the background microwave radiation of the universe at specific time: to Wang's astonishment, fluctuations in the level of radiation form a message sent in Morse Code that continues the countdown, an experience which Da Shi later describes as being akin to “the universe winking at you.”<sup>163</sup> Though still unaware of the countdown's purpose, Wang Miao experiences a profound sense of powerlessness, as if he had “turned into nothing but a simple timer, a bell that tolled for he knew not whom.”<sup>164</sup>

Later on, as the Battle Command Center gains access to the files on the *Judgment Day*, it is revealed that the experimental results and the countdown were in fact created through technological sleight of hand. These miracles were accomplished through the use of “sophons” (智子 *zhizi*),<sup>165</sup> proton-sized artificial intelligences capable of adjusting their own dimensionality, which were created and sent to Earth by the Trisolarans as part of their plan to slow down humanity's scientific development. By entering particle accelerators, the sophons can affect the results of their collision tests; by repeatedly going through film or human retinas, they can create images; and by unfolding themselves into two dimensions, they can control how much of the cosmic background radiation reaches Earth. This allows the Trisolarans to attack scientific endeavors on Earth both through straight-forward industrial sabotage and through the creation of seemingly inexplicable phenomena, which they call their “Miracle Plan.”

163 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 134.

164 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 129.

165 As Ken Liu points out in a footnote (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 361), the Chinese term is a pun on the word for “proton” (质子 *zhizi*).

In the narrative of *The Three-Body Problem*, the illusions created by the sophons play a very similar role as they do in the Trisolarans' grand plan, that is, sowing doubt in the audience's mind about the validity of the scientific worldview. Through something as simple as a countdown and the readings from a radio telescope, Wang Miao is shaken to the very core; despite all of his scientific knowledge, he has to admit that what has happened is beyond his understanding, proclaiming that "I couldn't even imagine how to explain it *outside* of science. It's more than supernatural."<sup>166</sup> As such, the Trisolarans' illusions function as a perfect illustration of the so-called Clarke's Third Law, coined by the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, whom Liu Cixin has repeatedly mentioned as an influence on his own work.<sup>167</sup> The Third Law states that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic;"<sup>168</sup> in other words, without enough scientific knowledge one cannot tell the difference between technology, or something based on theoretically knowable scientific principles, and magic, which is something that science fundamentally *cannot* explain. As Wang Miao comes to believe that the miraculous phenomena he has experienced are "more than supernatural," he is therefore forced to abandon (at least temporarily) the comforting enlightenment faith in the commensurability of human knowledge with natural reality that had given meaning to his work as a scientist.

Nevertheless, unlike the Trisolarans would like mankind to believe (and as the savvy reader will have suspected from the start), not only are these "miracles" not supernatural in origin, but the technology that created them is based on the same basic, invariant laws of the universe as our own. Moreover, it was the very universality of these laws that made it possible for the Red Coast Project to construct the "elemental linguistic code,"<sup>169</sup> based on simple mathematics and physics, that would allow humans to communicate with the extraterrestrial civilization in the first place. This means that not only can humankind potentially master the technology of the Trisolarans, but also that even their culture and way of life could be assimilated

166 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 133; italics in the original.

167 Amy Qin, "In a Topsy-Turvy World, China Warms to Sci-Fi," *New York Times*, November 10, 2014, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/books/liu-cixins-the-three-body-problem-is-published-in-us.html>.

168 Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*, rev. ed. (London: Pan Books, 1973), 39.

169 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 170.

into our scientific understanding of the world, despite the fact that they are quite literally alien to us.<sup>170</sup> By showing that nothing about the Trisolarans is fundamentally unknowable, the novel firmly reaffirms the enlightenment view of the commensurability of human knowledge and natural reality, with nothing standing in the way of the goal of a “unified and universal science.”

However, this reaffirmation of the enlightenment view of the universe is not enough to restore Wang Miao’s sense of his own agency or his faith in humankind’s capability to take control of our destiny. Instead, after the truth about the Trisolarans is revealed, he falls into despair over the power that the aliens wield, believing it to be a foregone conclusion that their fleet (due to arrive on Earth in 400 years) will succeed in wiping out humanity. Unlike Ye Zhetai, who faced his own death calmly and took comfort in his faith in science, Wang Miao opts to drown his sorrows in alcohol with his fellow scientist Ding Yi, drunkenly proclaiming that “after this, decadence and depravity can be justified! We’re bugs! Bugs that are about to go extinct!”<sup>171</sup> Together with his earlier reaction to the countdown, this nihilistic outburst shows that both before and after Wang Miao learns the truth behind what he has experienced, he is most of all affected by a feeling of powerlessness that is quite at odds with the enlightenment idea of “knowledge as power.” Although he ends up with a more accurate picture of the universe than before, this does not increase his sense of his own agency, and instead leads him to the counter-enlightenment conclusion that humankind will not be able to control its destiny as a species—at least when confronted by a threat as powerful as the Trisolaran civilization.

Yet even the Trisolarans, despite their level of technological and scientific advancement, are far from almighty. The limits of their power are made clear as

170 It is worth noting that in *The Three-Body Problem*, the characters never see a Trisolaran or even find out what they look like; instead, all information about the aliens is second-hand and presented to the reader through some type of humanizing lens, such as the allegorical storyline of the *Three-Body* virtual reality game. This is also brought up in the text, such as when the Redemptionists’ fantasies about the Trisolarans are compared to those of “a young, unwordly person” imagining a potential lover they have never actually seen (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 319), or when Ye Wenjie reads the documents found on the *Judgment Day* and is forced to “envision the Trisolarans as humanoid” (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 347). It could therefore be argued that the novel leaves it open whether the characters are in fact correct in their understanding of the Trisolaran civilization; however, it is my argument that merely the establishment of communications between humankind and the Trisolarans renders the latter at least theoretically knowable to us, regardless of how much of the information received by the characters is actually reliable.

171 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 386.

Wang Miao advances into the final stages of the *Three Body* virtual reality game, which is an allegorical retelling of the aliens' history. Due to its orbit around a three-star system, the planet Trisolaris switches seemingly at random between "Stable Eras" (恒纪元 *hengjiyuan*) suitable for civilization and "Chaotic Eras" (乱纪元 *luanjiyuan*) where the conditions are so hostile that the Trisolarans can survive only by dehydrating themselves and hibernating until another Stable Era begins. Much of their history has been spent attempting to find a solution to the mathematical three-body problem, which would allow them to predict when one era ends and another begins; ultimately, however, they discover that not only is there no solution to the problem, but that Trisolaris will eventually be drawn into one of the stars and be completely destroyed. Upon learning of this discovery, Wang Miao asks: "If even an extremely simple arrangement like the three-body system is unpredictable chaos, how can we have any faith in discovering the laws of the complicated universe?"<sup>172</sup>

This question of unpredictability is, in fact, a highly significant challenge to the enlightenment promise of controlling our own destiny. As Song Mingwei notes in his analysis of Liu Cixin's works, "uncertainty and infinity challenge confidence in totality and integrity, and dismantle the rationalism and self-determination that underline the optimistic version of humanism."<sup>173</sup> In *The Three-Body Problem*, even though a rational mind can theoretically understand the laws governing natural reality, the infinity and infinite complexity of the universe mean that we cannot use this understanding to achieve true control over our own circumstances. While the complex orbital mechanics of the planet Trisolaris may be the most imaginative illustration of this in the text, they are by no means the only one: as Ken Liu suggests, the Cultural Revolution can be read as Earth's equivalent of a Chaotic Era within the novel, and although "we may not have three suns around which our planet revolves, [...] almost every major change of our history comes as a result of some unpredictable confluence of events."<sup>174</sup> In my reading of *The Three-Body Problem*, therefore, the seemingly inexplicable and irrational violence of the Cultural Revolution, the invasion of Earth by the Trisolarans, and the chaotic orbit of the aliens' home planet all become examples of just how powerless sentient beings are in "the worst of all possible universes," and of how our attempts to "build a better life"

172 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 236.

173 Song, "After 1989," 12.

174 Pandell, "WIRED Book Club."

in it are constantly threatened by forces beyond our control, from our own violent impulses and tendency of descending into inhumanity to the physical preconditions set for us by the immutable laws of nature.

### 3.8 Sunsets and Locusts: Resignation or Fighting for Survival?

Having established just how powerless we are in the cosmic scheme of things, *The Three-Body Problem* posits a choice: we can either give up on the idea that humankind is worth trying to protect, or we can continue to fight for our survival. These two options are exemplified by Ye Wenjie and Da Shi, the two characters that Wang Miao has the closest and most complex depicted relationships with. At one point after he has witnessed the universal countdown, Wang muses that “in his current state, his mental stability depended on two pillars: this old woman [Ye Wenjie], who had weathered so many storms and become as gentle as water, and Shi Qiang, the man who feared nothing because he knew nothing.”<sup>175</sup> By the end of the novel, however, he has to considerably revise his mental images of the two, as Ye Wenjie is revealed to be the leader of the ETO and to have completely lost her faith in her own species, while Da Shi is shown to have much keener insights into humankind and our place in the universe than first suggested. Tellingly, it is in fact from Ye that Wang Miao first hears the claim that humans are mere “bugs” compared to the Trisolarans, and to Da Shi that he repeats this claim during his drunken outburst. In order to understand what the novel tells us about the choice between resignation or fighting for survival, I shall therefore examine the final appearances of these characters in the novel, which also form its last and next-to-last chapters.

At the very end of *The Three-Body Problem*, Ye Wenjie is allowed to return to the mountain where Red Coast Base once stood, this being the only request she has made after learning the truth about the Trisolarans’ plans for Earth from her

175 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 150.



captors. Using up the last bit of her strength, she manages to climb up the peak in time to see the sun setting amongst the clouds, painting the sky a “magnificent, bloody red” in color, an image which she declares in a whisper to be a “sunset for humanity.”<sup>176</sup> In context, this clearly refers not only to our species’ coming destruction at the hands of the Trisolarans, but also to the impossibility of any kind of redemption or moral salvation for humankind, either through our own efforts or those of any outside force. As the red sun also symbolizes Mao Zedong, this scene can be interpreted as the symbolic final burial of Maoist utopianism and its hope for a generation of “new men,” and by extension for any kind of utopia, whether it is to be achieved through revolutionary struggle, the intervention of higher powers, or the application of rational thought. Even the modest idea of working together with another civilization to build a better life, invoked in the message sent out from Red Coast Base, seems to have been shown to be an impossible dream: as Mingwei Song puts it, “the worst of all possible universes is a place where every civilization is a hunting tribe set out to eliminate rivals”<sup>177</sup>—or, even if Liu Cixin himself does not support such an interpretation,<sup>178</sup> a Cold War superpower determined to defend itself against competitors by being the one to strike first.

This bleak ending is in clear contrast to the second-to-last chapter of the novel, where Da Shi finds Wang Miao and Ding Yi drunk at the latter’s apartment. The two scientists explain to the detective that they are convinced that since human beings are nothing but “bugs” compared to the Trisolarans, we will never have weapons capable of repelling them and preventing our extinction. To prove them wrong, Da Shi takes the two to his hometown in Hebei province and shows them a wheat field crawling with locusts, asking the scientists whether “the technological gap between humans and Trisolarans” is “greater than the one between locusts and humans.” Stunned by this question, Wang Miao and Ding Yi realize that, despite our advanced technology, the locusts have survived every attempt to eliminate them, and therefore humankind might also survive the Trisolaran invasion. Deeply impressed by “the dignity of life on Earth,” they pour out the wine they brought on the ground as “a toast for the bugs” and head back home, determined to do their best to help

176 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 390.

177 Song, “After 1989”, 11.

178 Kangassalo, “Kun avaruuden sivilisaatio soittaa.”

humankind in the struggle ahead.<sup>179</sup>

Despite its apparent simplicity, this penultimate chapter is much more difficult to interpret than the ending that follows it. Here, all the questions raised in the text about humankind's apparent incapability of solving the moral challenges facing it through rational thought are suddenly dropped, and the only thing concerning the characters is whether our species will continue to exist for more than 400 years or not. Da Shi's demonstration that humankind still has a fighting chance is framed positively, but at the same time it signals the start of a new arms race between us and the Trisolarans, one with an even greater potential for destruction than the "historical zenith" of our "madness" during the Cold War. Should we simply hope that, despite everything we've been shown, this conflict will also eventually defuse itself and not end in the mutual destruction of the two civilizations? Or are we supposed to embrace what Mingwei Song calls Liu Cixin's "absolute preference for survival over civilization" and just accept that the aliens may need to be completely exterminated for humankind to survive? If so, does this also not mean the acceptance of the ultimately self-destructive dominance of rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer warned us about, meaning that even this heinous act would only buy us some additional time to exist in a state of repression and inhumanity?

There are, however, aspects of this penultimate chapter that point towards a more positive interpretation, if we compare it to the novel's earlier scenes of environmental destruction. While previously the dominance of human rationality over the natural environment seemed inevitable, here the miracle of the locusts, as awe-inspiring in its way as any of those manufactured by the Trisolarans, raises the hope that living beings will be able survive and flourish even in the most inhospitable conditions. At the same time, the emphasis on the commonality between humans and locusts, reminiscent of the spirit behind Mike Evans' Pan-Species Communism, implies that the way forward is not the one marked by the anthropocentric enlightenment tradition. Rather, we might understand the novel as suggesting that instead of trying to achieve total control over natural reality, humankind should adapt to it in order to survive and find meaning in our continuing evolution as a species. A similar point is made by Thieret, who sees the final lines of

179 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 385–388.

Liu Cixin's "Taking Care of God" as "a utopian call to action, where utopia is a function of the innate need to adapt to the inexorably changing conditions of the universe":

"[...] that we contain an evolutionary imperative to survival, and that all efforts at survival are ultimately doomed, is one source of the story's utopianism. For by hoping against hope, refusing despair even while recognising that mortality and entropy being the ultimate principles of our individual lives and universe, the realisation of utopia—conceived as an inherently static, closed, everlasting paradise—is impossible, the story affirms that change and progress are yet possible. [...] Human civilisation is exposed as a transitory phenomenon, not a totality after all but a small part of a much larger, dynamic universe. However, this belittling of human civilisation should not be occasion for despair: humanity is not at the mercy of history. Humanity still can and must shape its own future through individual actions [...]"<sup>180</sup>

The importance of this message of hope can perhaps be better understood if we return to the end of the novel and Ye Wenjie. While her apparent resignation to the potential extinction of humankind may be the logical end result of her "rational consideration" of our evils, it might be asked whether this consideration ultimately served any purpose. If Ye Wenjie had not spent so much of her life pondering the dark side of humanity, would she have been able to live a happier life, and would she still have chosen to betray Earth for the Trisolarans? As it was, her growing awareness of the powerlessness of rationality to stop violence and destruction only led to more violence and destruction—a critique that David Hoy also aims at Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of enlightenment:

What will be the point of finding out that enlightenment leads to self-destruction? If discovering that feature of enlightenment is itself a form of self-enlightenment, then the critical self-reflection will not hinder and may even promote destruction. [...] if the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to be

180 Adrian Thieret, "Society and Utopia in Liu Cixin," 37–38.

taken seriously, the collapse into barbarism would appear to have no rational antidote. This historical pessimism makes the moral condemnation of repressive practices and of barbarism seem futile.<sup>181</sup>

Hoy further argues that the version of humankind's history ending in our self-destruction is by necessity "only a regulative idea, or a fiction," which can only be told because we have not yet destroyed ourselves: "We cannot really believe that our total self-destruction is certain, and we cognitively entertain the possibility only by suspending this disbelief. [...] The final destruction is not constitutive [of our actions] because, if it really did occur, we could no longer act at all, or at least, not for long and not significantly. That occurrence would make our previous actions pointless. All we can ever do is act so that it will not occur."<sup>182</sup> In other words, if Ye Wenjie is right and humankind's extinction is certain, it does not ultimately matter whether we believe her or not; if she is wrong, on the other hand, it is vital that we do not resign ourselves to this fate. The emphasis on the importance of survival is justified on the basis that as long as there are sentient beings in the universe, an irrevocable descent into inhumanity and oppression can still be conceivably avoided, no matter how unlikely it may seem.

Of course, since *The Three-Body Problem* is only the first part of a trilogy, it is hardly surprising that the ultimate fate of humankind would still be in the air by the end of the novel. When read in comparison to each other, these two final chapters form an intentionally ambiguous picture of what is to come, a picture that because of its very ambiguity offers no easy solutions, yet simultaneously contains an element of hope. In a way that is reminiscent of the mathematical problem which inspired the novel's title, the ultimate discovery here may be that there is no real way to predict the course of human history, dependent as it is on too many unknown variables, and that the only way for us to know our future is to go on until we reach the end of our story.

181 Hoy, "Early Frankfurt School," 116.

182 Hoy, "Early Frankfurt School," 117–118.

## 4. Conclusions

In answer to an interview question on whether other recent works of Chinese science fiction have a similar view of the future as *The Three-Body Problem*, Liu Cixin gave the following description of his output in comparison to that of his fellow writers:

Few works of contemporary Chinese science fiction hold a positive view of scientific development and an optimistic attitude towards the future. Like most current American science fiction, most Chinese science fiction concerns itself with the negative effects of scientific advancement and the dark future that will result. In this respect, I'm somewhat of an oddball among Chinese writers. [...] Among Chinese intellectuals, it's fashionable to emphasize the problems created by new technology and science. But it's worth reflecting on the fact that my science-positive works have been more influential.<sup>183</sup>

183 Grassmann, "The Three-Body Problem and beyond."

Setting aside the question of whether Liu Cixin is correct in his assessment of contemporary science fiction in general, these comments raise several questions about how we should interpret certain aspects of his landmark novel. How are we supposed to view the fact that in this “science-positive” work, advanced science and technology are time and again deployed for militaristic and destructive purposes, from the Red Coast Project’s search for extraterrestrial allies to the “Flying Blade” nanomaterials used against the ETO or the sophons sent to sabotage humankind’s progress? And what should we make of the ending, where humanity is heading towards extinction in an interstellar war and the only ray of hope is offered not by any of the novel’s numerous scientist characters but by Da Shi, who is noted to not have “even basic knowledge of science”?<sup>184</sup> It does not seem unreasonable to claim that taken in isolation, these are choices that might be expected from an author deeply critical of science and anxious about the future, not from one who claims to regard both with positivity and optimism.

I have brought up Liu Cixin’s views of his own work here because they are, at least at first glance, in many ways fascinatingly different from the interpretation of *The Three-Body Problem* that I have outlined in this thesis. In my analysis, although the novel starts out with a strong condemnation of the fanaticism of the Cultural Revolution reminiscent of scar literature and juxtaposes said fanaticism with the scientific rationality represented by Ye Zhetai, it later moves on to significantly complicate this picture. The seemingly rational utopian ideals of the Red Coast Project documents are brought into question by their situation within the “madness” of the Cold War, and the idea that the Cultural Revolution’s end was the start of a “new era” in Chinese history is subverted by the “cultural bastardy” of characters like Ye Wenjie, whose actions embody the legacy of the mass campaign even as she tries to repudiate it. Through the example of both her and the Earth–Trisolaris Organization in general, *The Three-Body Problem* also shows that far from acting as an antidote against fanaticism, “rational consideration” can rather inspire new forms of fanatical ideology. Furthermore, in its depiction of environmental destruction and the violence of “Operation Guzheng,” the novel explores how rationality reduces both the natural world and human beings into objects of knowledge, opening the door for the “reversion to barbarism” examined by Adorno and Horkheimer as well as

184 Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, 133.

humankind's self-destruction. Finally, although ultimately reaffirming the commensurability of human knowledge and natural reality assumed by the enlightenment tradition, *The Three-Body Problem* questions whether our scientific worldview can truly offer us control over our destiny as species, or real comfort in the face of "the worst of all possible universes."

It is, however, this description of the world of *The Three-Body Problem* that perhaps allows us connect Liu Cixin's above statement on his work with my analysis of it. At the end of an essay on his trilogy in the context of Chinese science fiction, Liu explains that he "wrote about the worst of all possible universes [...] out of hope that we can strive for the best of all possible Earths."<sup>185</sup> It is my view that at heart, *The Three-Body Problem* is therefore a cautionary tale that warns us of the monsters created by both the "sleep" and the "dream" of reason, which necessarily means drawing a bleak picture of our future as a species and of our possibility of changing it. Yet as the final chapters of the novel show, Liu's warning is also directed against losing all hope in humankind, and so ultimately sends the message that it is still worth the effort to fight for the future—to try to realize, if not an "ideal world," then at least a better life in this vast universe.

185 Liu, "The Worst of All Possible Universes."

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